X-MEN
X OF SWORDS
MARVEL

[01–22]
[XOS_X]

X-MEN X OF SWORDS

[01–22]
[XOS_X]

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]

PRELUDE: X-Men #12
Writer: Jonathan Hickman
Artist: Leinil Francis Yu
Color Artist: Sunny Gho
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Leinil Francis Yu & Sunny Gho

CHAPTER 1: X of Swords: Creation #1
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Artist: Pepe Larraz
Color Artist: Marte Gracia
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Pepe Larraz & Marte Gracia

CHAPTER 2: X-Factor #4
Writer: Leah Williams
Artist: Carlos Gómez
Color Artist: Israel Silva
Letterer: VC's Joe Caramagna
Cover Art: Ivan Shavrin

CHAPTER 3: Wolverine #6
Writer: Benjamin Percy
Artist: Viktor Bogdanovic
Color Artist: Matthew Wilson
Letterer: VC's Cory Petit
Cover Art: Adam Kubert & Frank Martin

CHAPTER 4: X-FORCE #13
Writer: Benjamin Percy
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Color Artist: Matthew Wilson
Letterer: VC's Joe Caramagna
Cover Art: Dustin Weaver & Edgar Delgado

CHAPTER 5: Marauders #13
Writer: Vita Ayala
Artist: Matteo Lolli
Color Artist: Edgar Delgado
Letterer: VC's Cory Petit
Cover Art: Russell Dauterman & Matthew Wilson

CHAPTER 6: Hellions #5
Writer: Zeb Wells
Artist: Carmen Carnero
Color Artist: David Curiel
Letterer: VC's Ariana Maher
Cover Art: Stephen Segovia & Sunny Gho

CHAPTER 7: New Mutants #13
Writer: Ed Brisson
Artist: Rod Reis
Letterer: VC's Travis Lanham
Cover Art: Rod Reis

CHAPTER 8: Cable #5
Writer: Gerry Duggan
Artist: Phil Noto
Letterer: VC's Joe Sabino
Cover Art: Phil Noto

CHAPTER 9: Excalibur #13
Writer: Tini Howard
Artist: R.B. Silva
Color Artist: Nolan Woodard
Letterer: VC's Ariana Maher
Cover Art: Mahmud Asrar & Matthew Wilson

CHAPTER 10: X-Men #13
Writer: Jonathan Hickman
Artist: Mahmud Asrar
Color Artist: Sunny Gho
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Leinil Francis Yu & Sunny Gho

CHAPTER 11: X of Swords: Stasis #1
Writers: Jonathan Hickman & Tini Howard
Artists: Pepe Larraz & Mahmud Asrar
Color Artist: Marte Gracia
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Pepe Larraz & Marte Gracia

CHAPTER 12: X-Men #14
Writer: Jonathan Hickman
Artists: Mahmud Asrar & Leinil Francis Yu
Color Artist: Sunny Gho
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Leinil Francis Yu & Sunny Gho

CHAPTERS 13–14: Marauders #14-15
Writers: Gerry Duggan & Benjamin Percy
Artist: Stefano Caselli
Color Artist: Edgar Delgado
Letterer: VC's Cory Petit
Cover Art: Russell Dauterman & Matthew Wilson

CHAPTER 15: Excalibur #14
Writer: Tini Howard
Artist: Phil Noto
Letterer: VC's Ariana Maher
Cover Art: Mahmud Asrar & Matthew Wilson

CHAPTER 16: Wolverine #7
Writers: Benjamin Percy & Gerry Duggan
Artist: Joshua Cassara
Color Artist: Guru-eFX
Letterer: VC's Cory Petit
Cover Art: Adam Kubert & Frank Martin

CHAPTER 17: X-Force #14
Writers: Benjamin Percy & Gerry Duggan
Artist: Joshua Cassara
Color Artist: Guru-eFX
Letterer: VC's Joe Caramagna
Cover Art: Dustin Weaver & Edgar Delgado

CHAPTER 18: Hellions #6
Writer: Zeb Wells
Artist: Carmen Carnero
Color Artist: David Curiel
Letterer: VC's Ariana Maher
Cover Art: Stephen Segovia & Rain Beredo

CHAPTER 19: Cable #6
Writer: Gerry Duggan
Artist: Phil Noto
Letterer: VC's Joe Sabino
Cover Art: Phil Noto

CHAPTER 20: X-Men #15
Writer: Jonathan Hickman
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Color Artist: Sunny Gho
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Leinil Francis Yu & Sunny Gho

CHAPTER 21: Excalibur #15
Writer: Tini Howard
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Color Artists: Sunny Gho & Rachelle Rosenberg
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Leinil Francis Yu & Sunny Gho

CHAPTER 22: X of Swords: Destruction #1
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Color Artist: Marte Gracia
Letterer: VC's Clayton Cowles
Cover Art: Pepe Larraz & Marte Gracia

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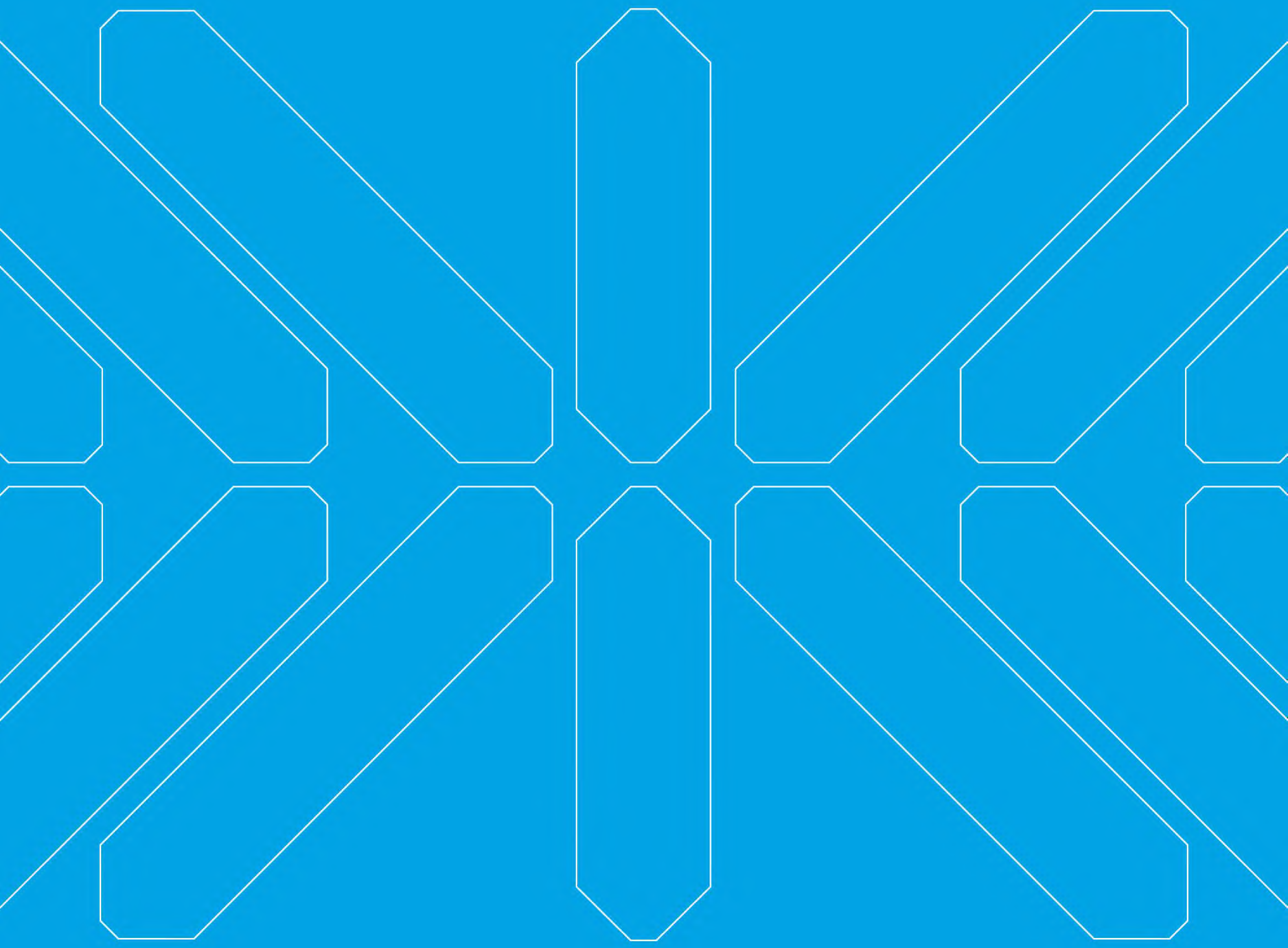
[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
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[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite________]

Leinil '20

X-MEN #12

[PR_XOS] [XM12]

HICKMAN
YU
GHO

PRELUDE

PRELUDE

00

[kra_[0.12]
[koa_[0.12]

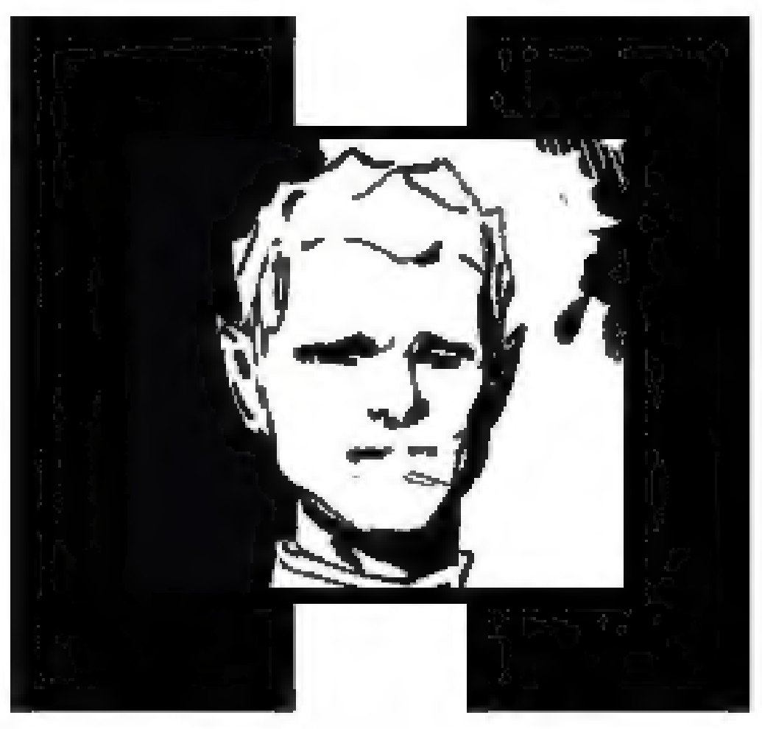
[kra_[0.X]
[koa_[0.X]

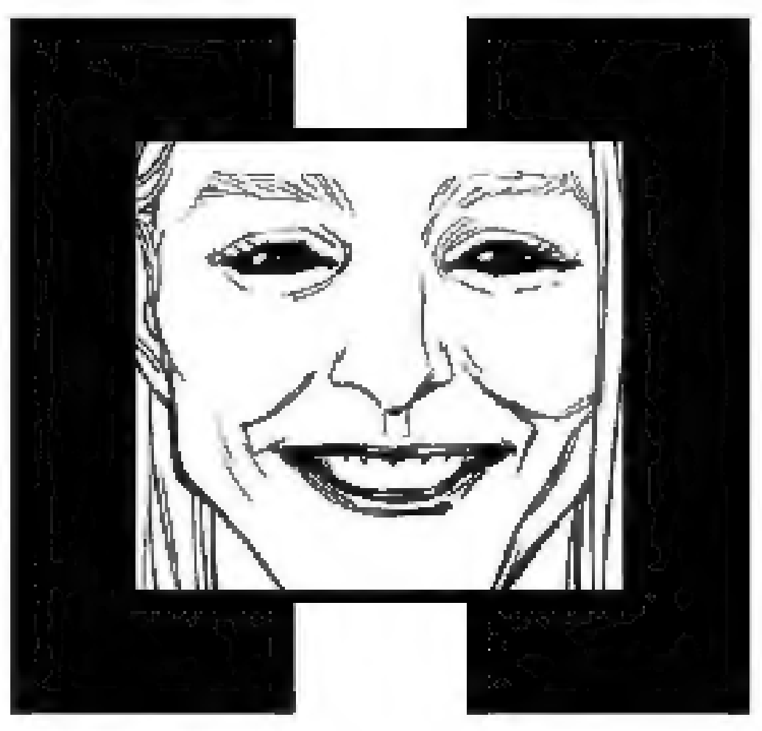
NOW, AS THEN

In the early days of the Krakoan nation, it merged with a mysterious island of beasts -- a piece of Krakoa's lost other half, Arakko. The only other inhabitant of this fragment was a Summoner -- invulnerable and able to call forth monsters -- who has now made his home on Krakoa.

Rockslide

Loa


Anole


Summoner

Apocalypse

Krakoa. The Arakko Point.
We've learned so much about one another. What we *love*, what we *hate*... the things we *believe*...
All the fear in our hearts and doubt in our minds... but now we come to the sharp end of it.
Real weakness. The chinks in our armor. The soft spots that could cost us ***everything.***
Your move, *friend.*
*Yeah, yeah...*I'm moving.
Now, let me take a good look at you...
Ah! ***I see*** you.
You're invulnerable. That's your mutant power, that you cannot be hurt...
Except your eyes, Summoner.
That's your weakness.
Yes. *And what about you?*

This, my friend, is fascinating. Your external form is simply a rocky shell--*armor of stone*--that protects and hides the energy self that is the ***real you.***
So that's why when he blows up...
Yeah. He just reforms.
That's pretty cool.
How's that a weakness?
Perhaps in this case, ***weakness*** is the ***wrong*** word.
But it is a ***vulnerability.*** If someone knew that, then they know where--*and how*--to strike.
But do not fear, we are all--
Allies?
Mutants with ***nothing to hide?***

If so, then good.
For I have come seeking knowledge.
Hello, Grandfather.
I was showing my friends here an Arakkii game...
Would you care to join in?
Do I look like a player of games?
Yes.
Very much so.

Leave us, children.
See ya later.
Soon will not be soon enough, friend.
Is it time, Grandfather?
I have built the External Gate. Constructed it on the bones of immortal mutants...
Just as planned. Just as was required.
So you've made a door home--*and the way to Arakko is open.* Now we simply have to walk through...
But I sense hesitation, Grandfather. Why?
When I saw you--*and that you were of my lineage*--I put my faith in that.
But before I send the whole of Krakoa across Otherworld and into the unknown, there are things I have to know that you have not yet told me.
You want to know what really happened?
How we fought? How we fell?
Yes.
Very well...

[the one]
[the__land]

A MUTANT’S HISTORY OF

ARAKKO

+

AND THE FALLEN WORLD OF AMENTH

[x_Okkara_]
[x_Arakko_]

[. . .. . .X]
[. . ... . X]

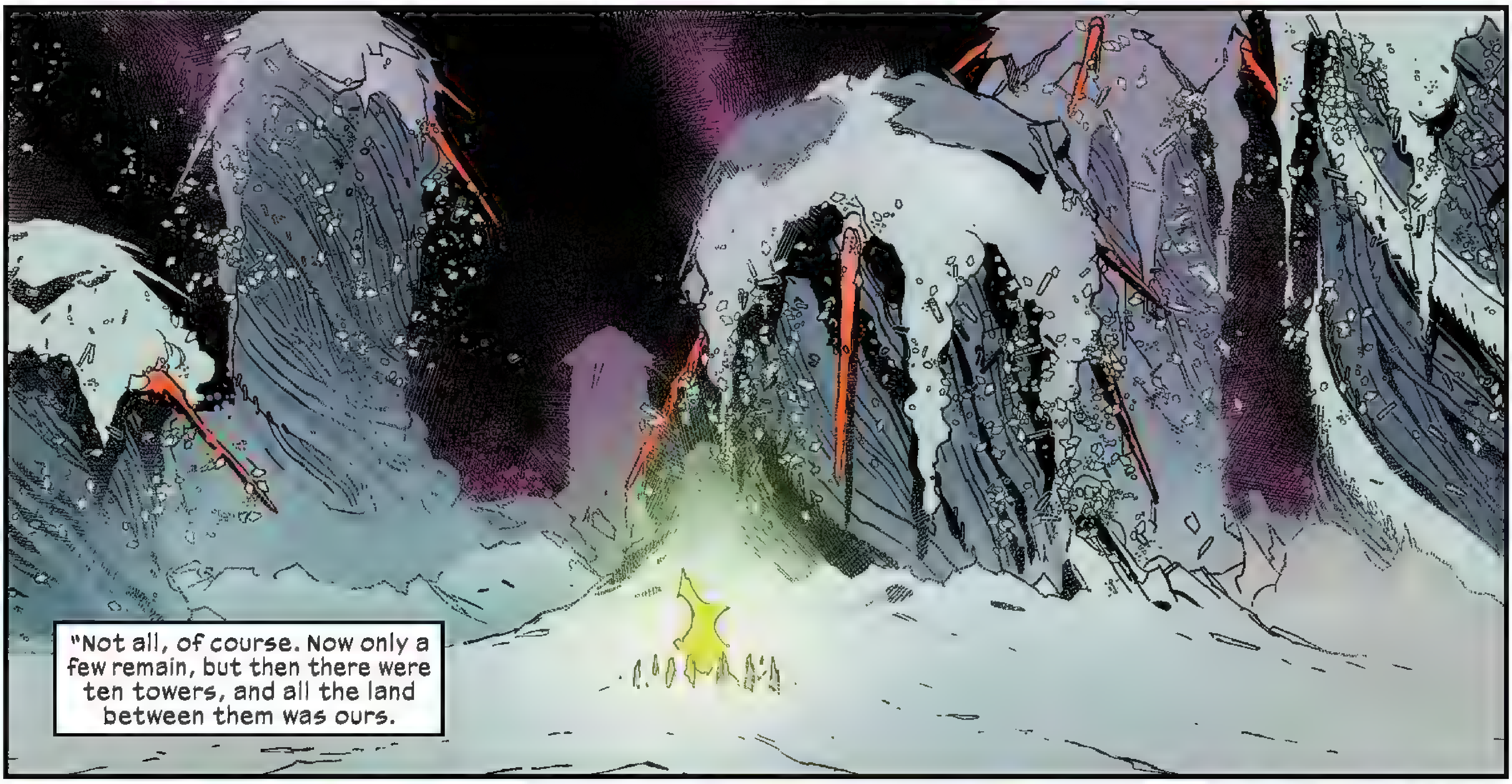
[Krakoa]
[We_eps]

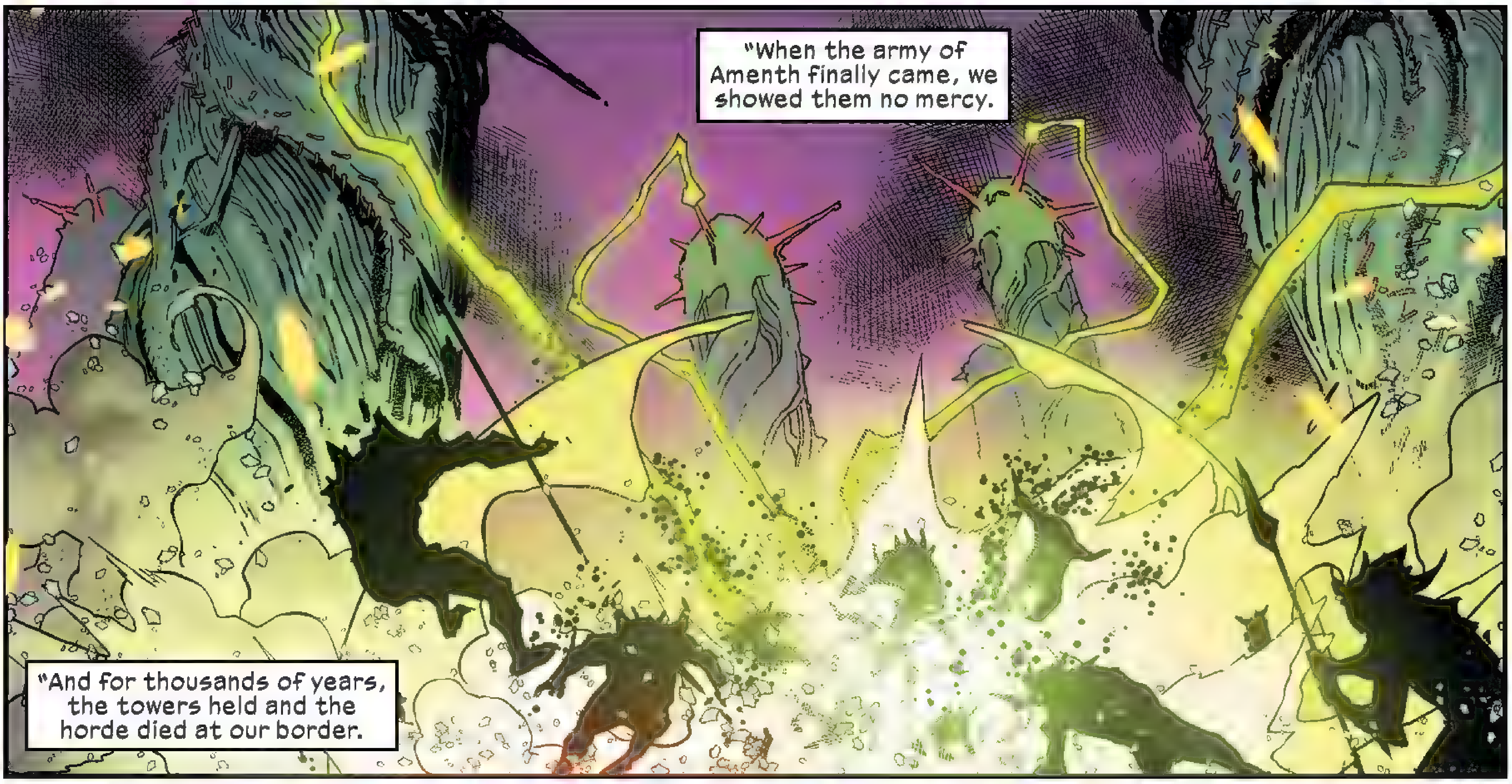
"I'll start with what *I know you know.* The story as was told to me: ***Okkara,*** the one land of mutants.
"It was ancient before that word existed, but not yet old in the way they were old.
"The Twilight Sword of the enemy tore the world asunder, and what was one became two.
"And from the chasm between them--*from that dark world*--the enemy poured into this world.

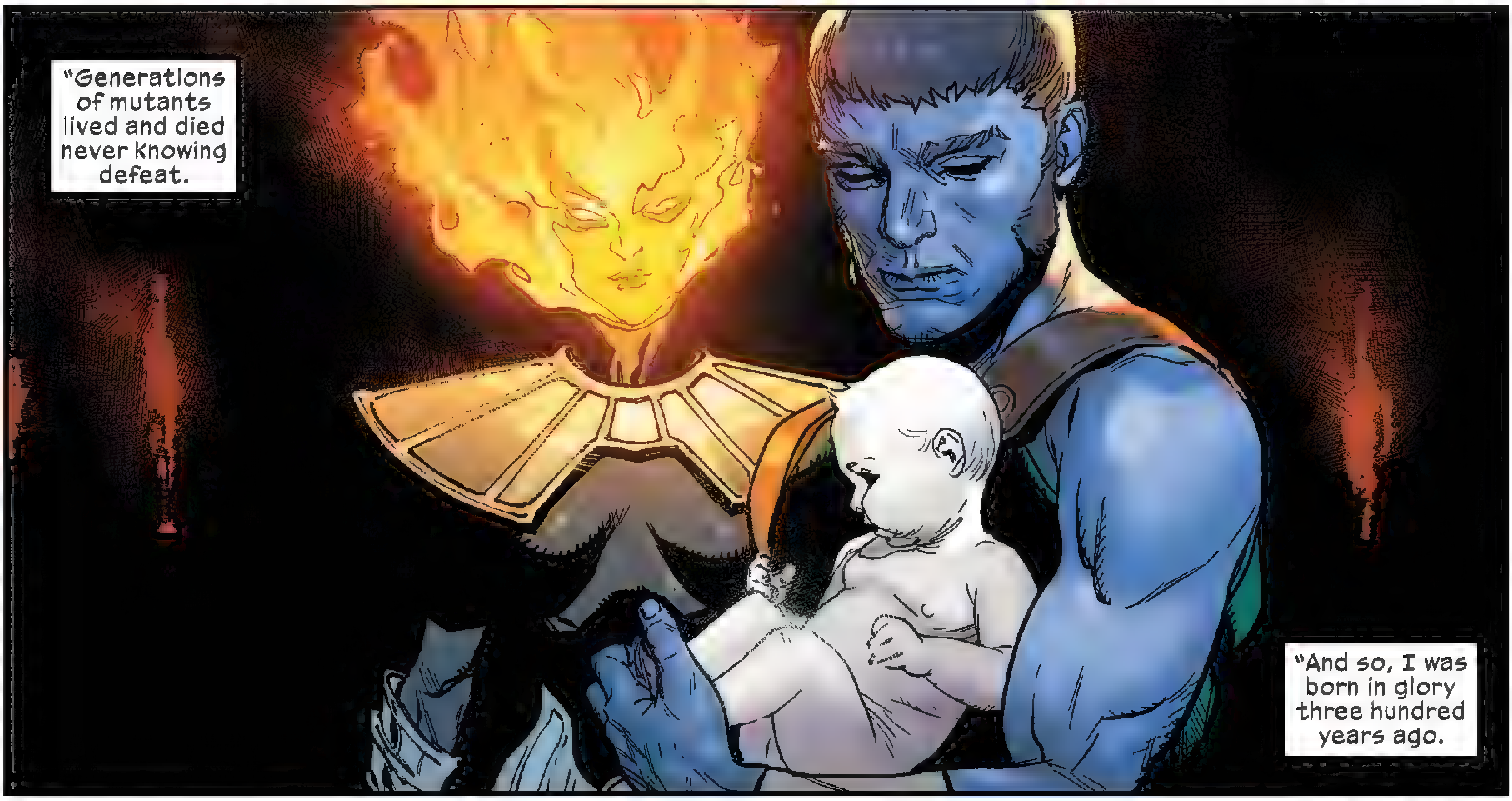
"Until, at great cost, the army of the enemy--*along with Arakko itself*--were pushed back through, and the chasm was sealed shut.
"But like all stories old enough to grow in the telling, it sometimes becomes difficult to separate *fact* from *fiction*...or *truth* from *lies*.
"Some say that you stayed behind to prevent that world from falling. To seal the breach and save what could be saved.
"After all, you were Apocalypse, the warrior-god in blue--*the great reseeder*--the first mutant of the second generation of mutantdom on Earth.
"But there are others who tell stories of betrayal--of sacrificing your family to preserve yourself and what little could be saved.

"Finally, there are whispers of something worse...judgment and slavery to fate--*that you were a prisoner to the whims of others.*
"The only sure truth that survives all telling is this:
"What should never have been cleaved in two was separated forever...
"Husband from wife. Parent from child. Arakko from Krakoa.
"From one trauma, the mutants of Arakko plunged themselves into the hell of the next one.

"What waited for them was not an army...
"*No.* For some it meant madness--for the rest it was the wasteland of a world called *Amenth.*
"A black world. A fallen world.
"What they saw surprised them. A desolate nothing littered with the bodies of defeated enemies. All knew this handiwork--all recognized the black acts of the White Sword and his One Hundred Champions.
"He was nowhere to be seen--*no trace of him remained*--but his bloody hand had brought Arakko time.
"And with that time, we worked wonders.
"It was our age of legends. A miracle of mutantdom. Much of the work done by brave mutant alchemists and engineers still stands to this day.


"Not all, of course. Now only a few remain, but then there were ten towers, and all the land between them was ours.


"When the army of Amenth finally came, we showed them no mercy.
"And for thousands of years, the towers held and the horde died at our border.

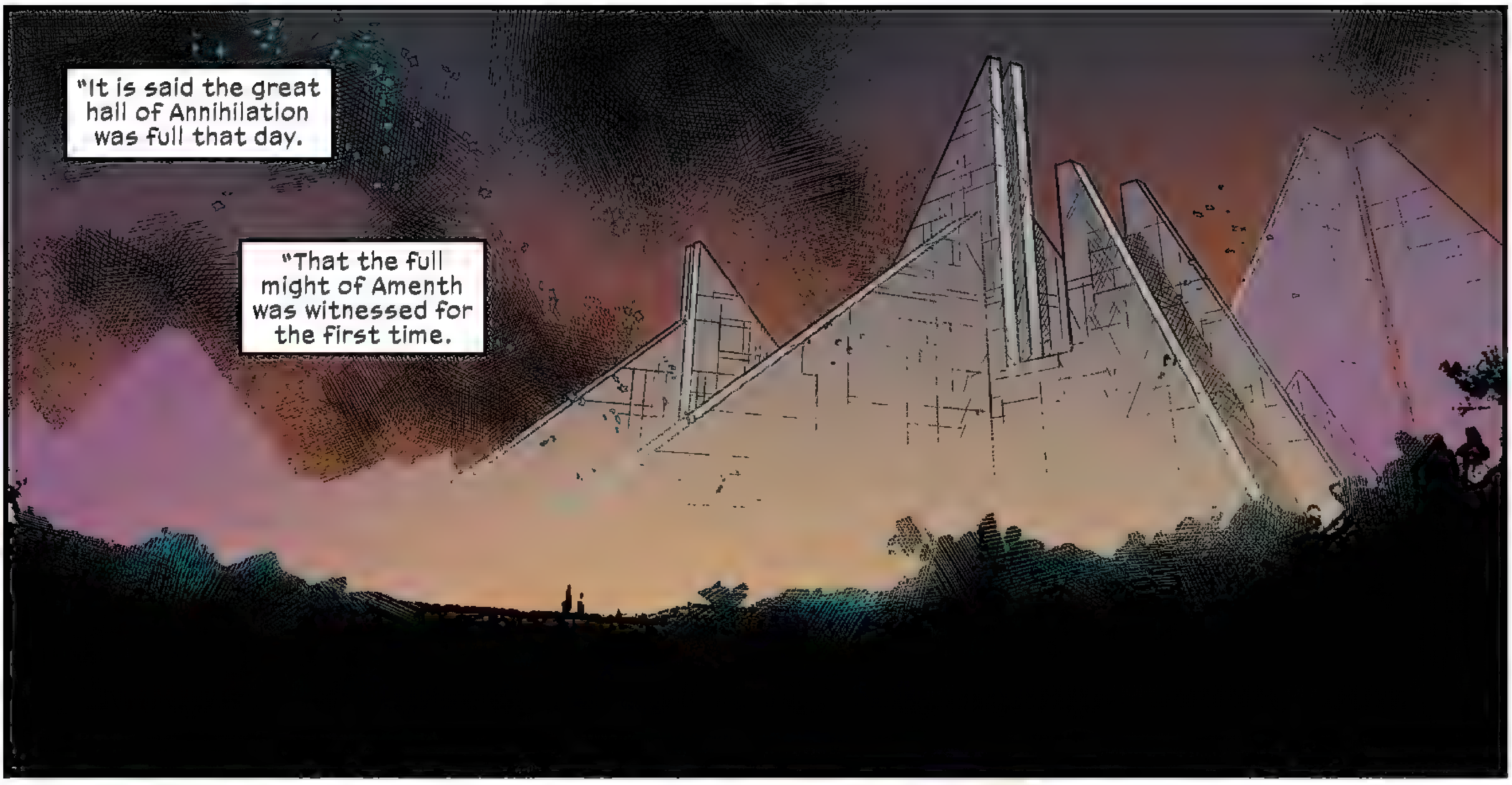

"Generations of mutants lived and died never knowing defeat.
"And so, I was born in glory three hundred years ago.

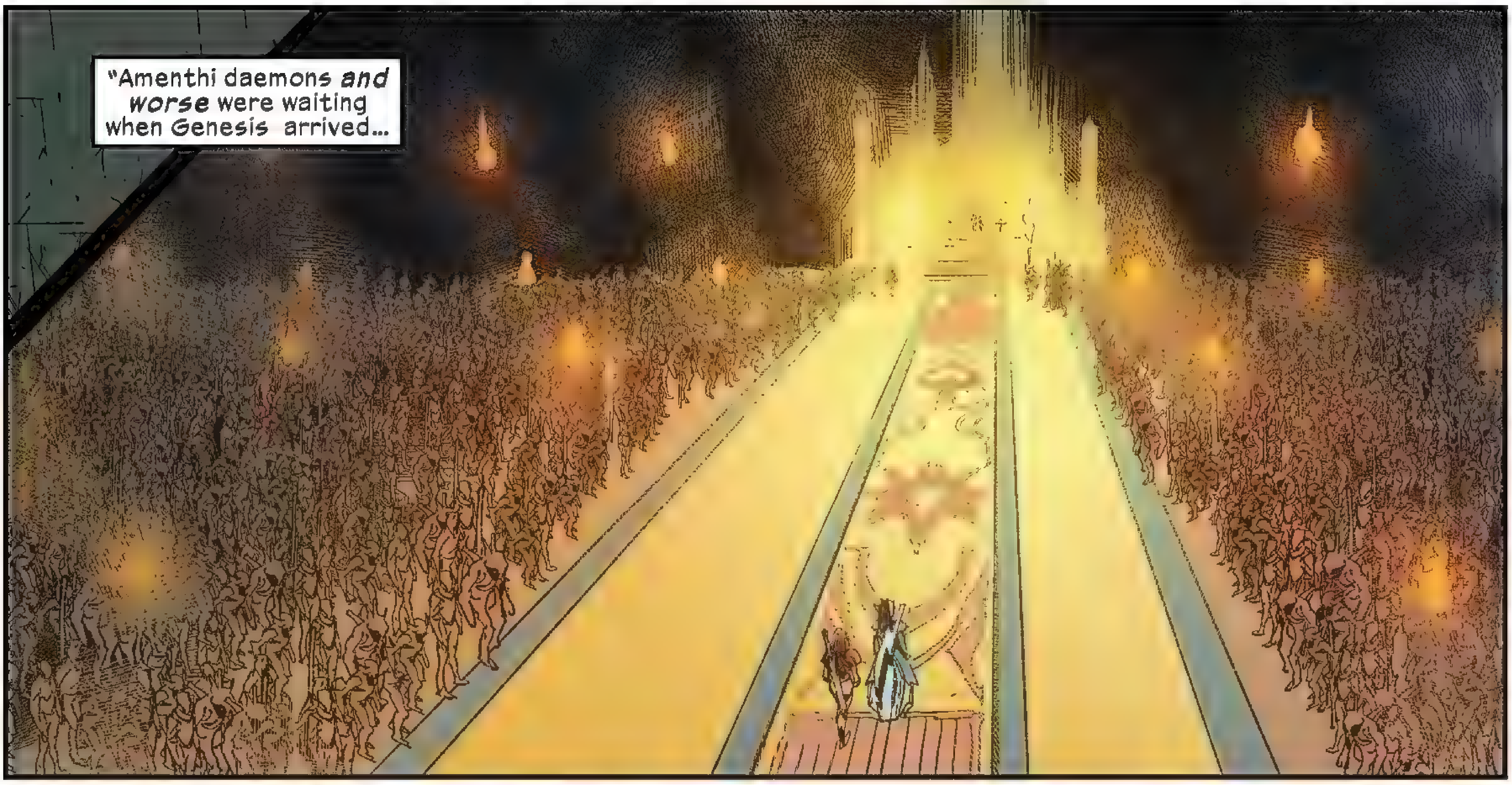
"As a child, all I knew was the world inside our walls.
"It was all any of us knew. It was a special kind of ignorance--living in the only safe place in a world of violence and believing it must be this way for all. We knew nothing of what Amenth truly was.
"When my crib mate, the high mutant prophet Idyll, went blind after seeing the fall of our great towers, people say Genesis laughed at him and threatened to remove his weak head from his weak shoulders.
"***Genesis.*** The authority of Arakko. The mother of Horsemen. *The wife of Apocalypse.*
"And instead of striking Idyll down, she raised an army...

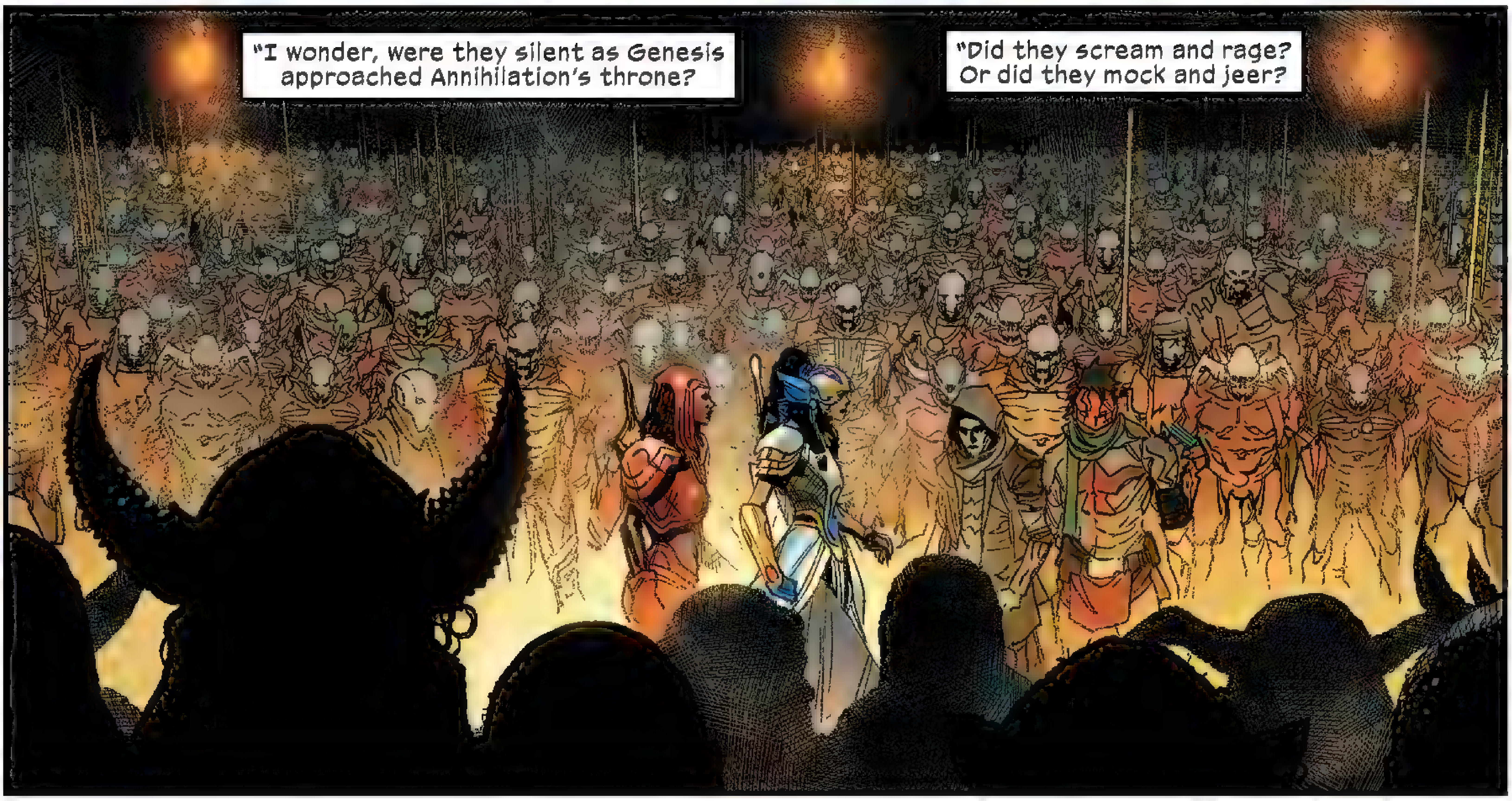
"They were gone for twenty years. Every few months word would arrive of their conquests--and all of Arakko would celebrate.
"We feasted on victory--*it was our birthright*--and Genesis fed us well.
"Then, two centuries ago, our army fell silent.
"Later, we would learn they had reached the Ivory Spire. It was the stronghold of the long-thought lost *White Sword, Purity.*
"He was our greatest healer--immortal...External. Each morning, the White Sword resurrected his one hundred champions and rode out to slaughter Amenthi daemons.
"Warring until the last soldier in his army died. Only to begin again the next day.

"Genesis said that the death and resurrection cycle he lived had become his *religion*.
"She said he had become just as alien as the horde he raged against, and we mutants of Arakko were the same to him.
"We tasted our first defeat at the hands of one of our own.
"We heard nothing for six years, and then--*having escaped by untold and never spoken means*--Genesis and the few mutants who survived returned home to Arakko.

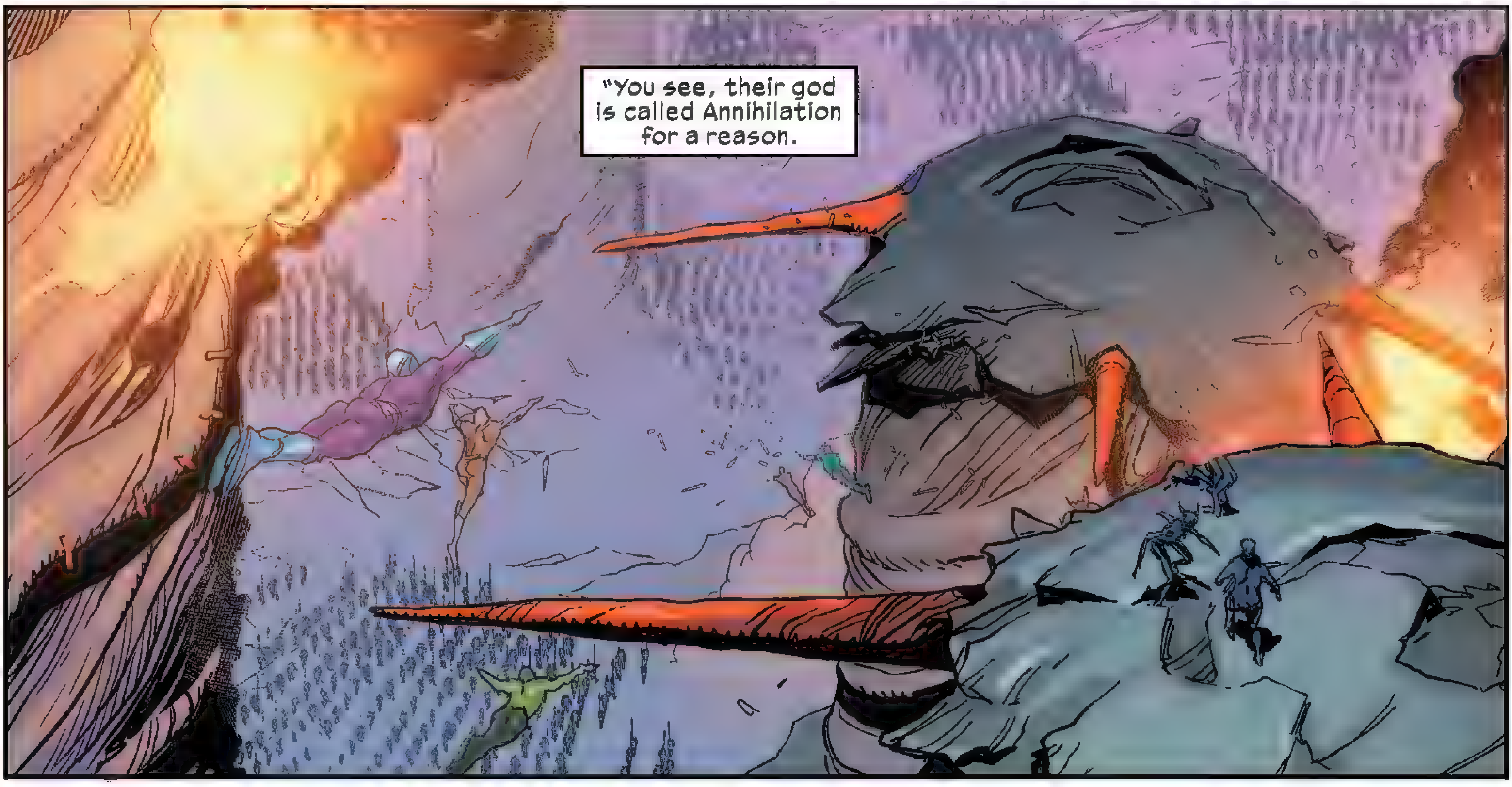
"They returned...only to find more defeat waiting for them.
"Isca, the traitor. Isca, the unbeaten.
"Her mutant power was that she could not lose--it was her power that forced her to join Amenth in the war against Okkara...
"Understand? She had to... They were going to win...and she cannot lose.
"Isca had been sent to invite Genesis to parlay with Annihilation--the god of Amenth--at the seat of the golden helm's power in the capital city of Amenth.
"No one knows what words passed between them, just that Genesis accepted.

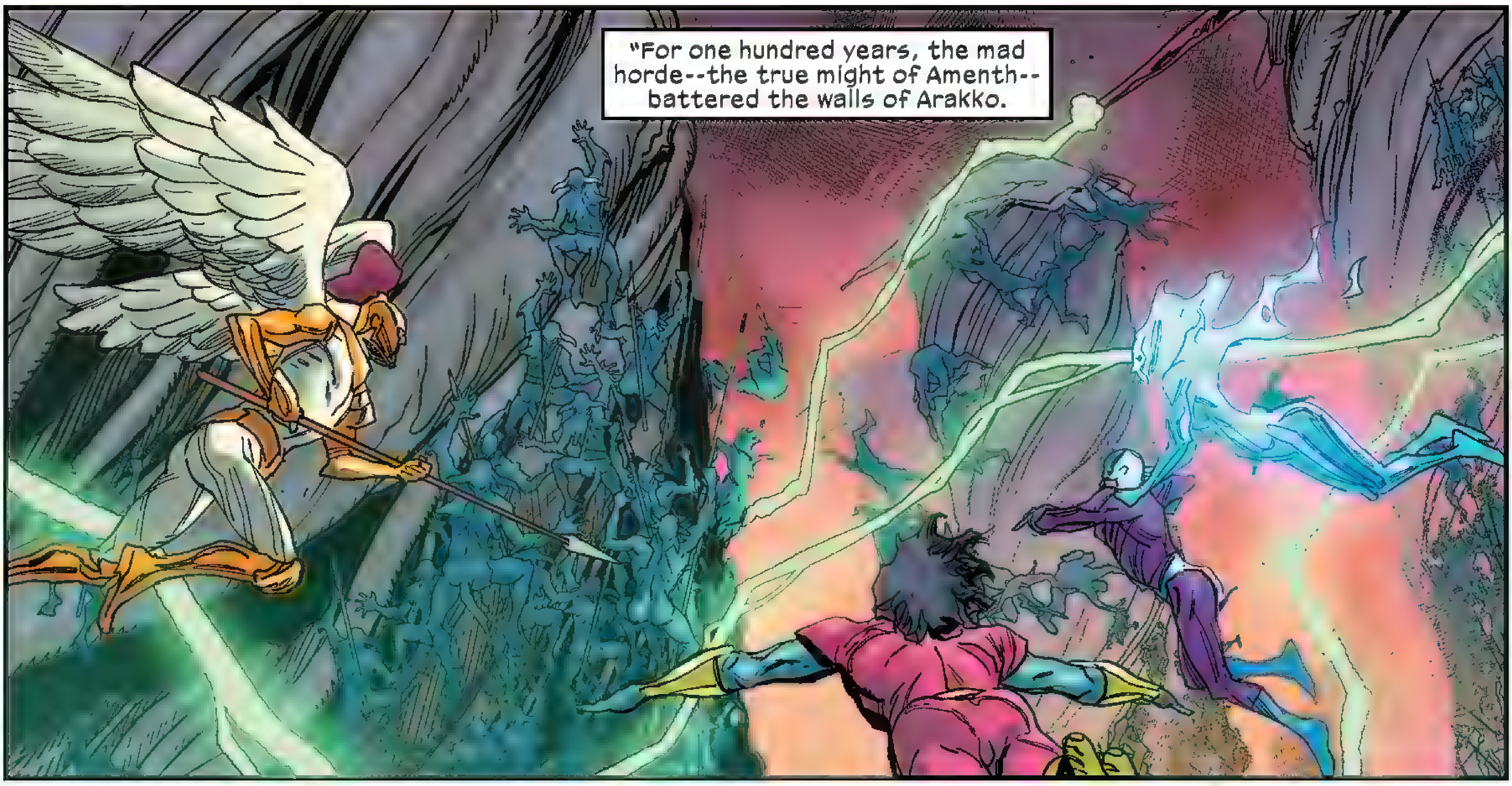

"It is said the great hall of Annihilation was full that day.
"That the full might of Amenth was witnessed for the first time.

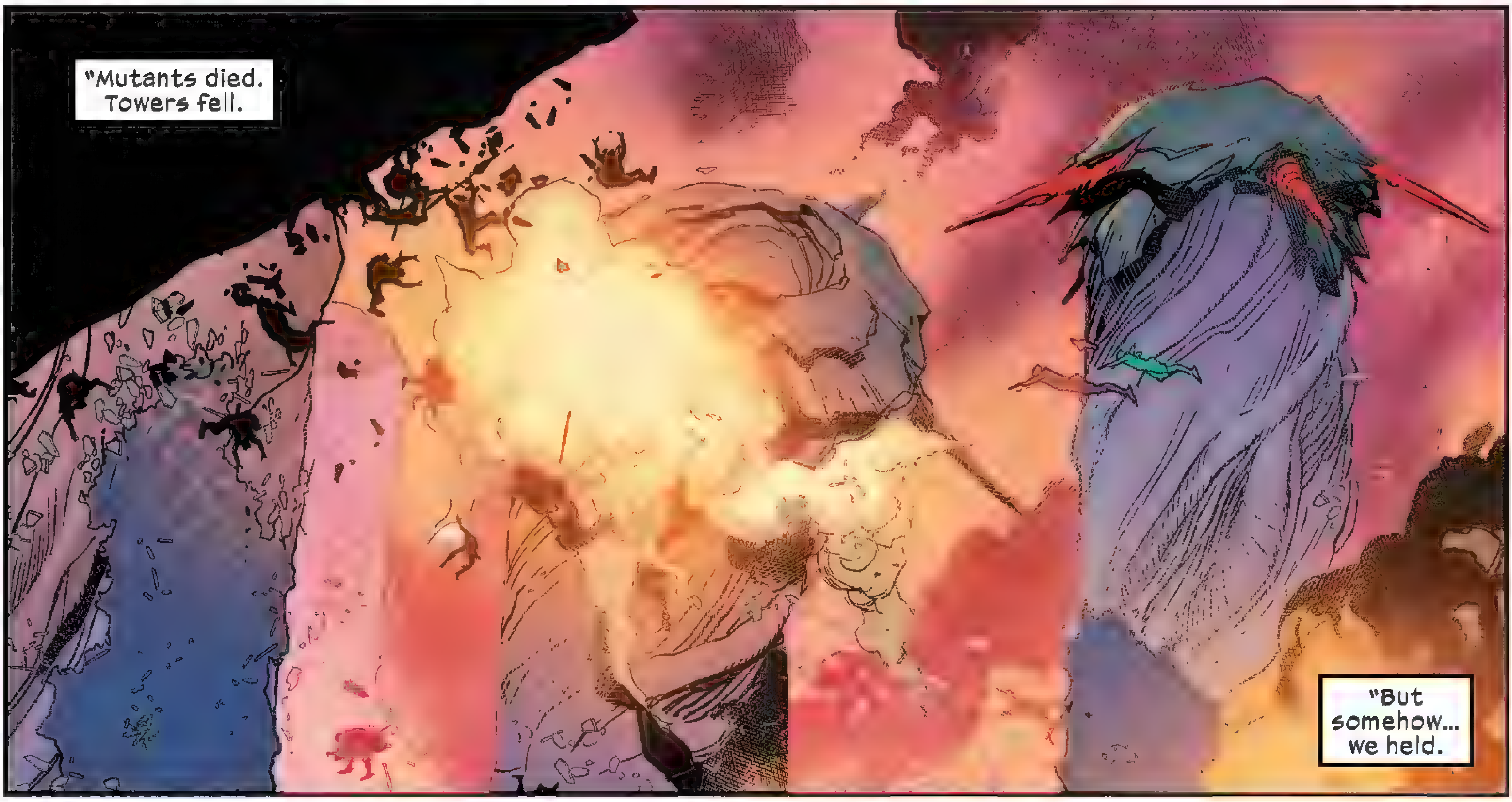

"Amenthi daemons *and worse* were waiting when Genesis arrived...

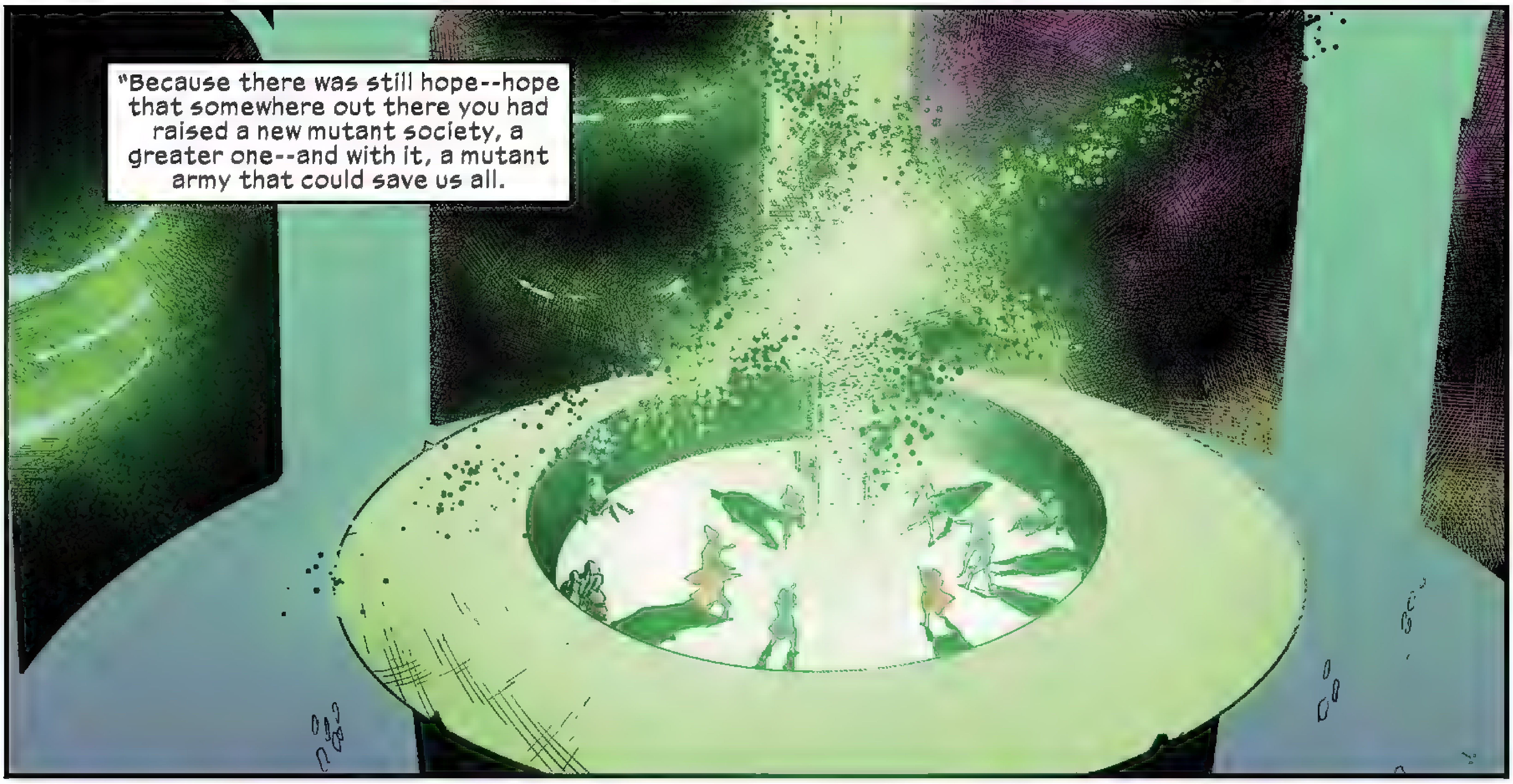

"I wonder, were they silent as Genesis approached Annihilation's throne?
"Did they scream and rage? Or did they mock and jeer?

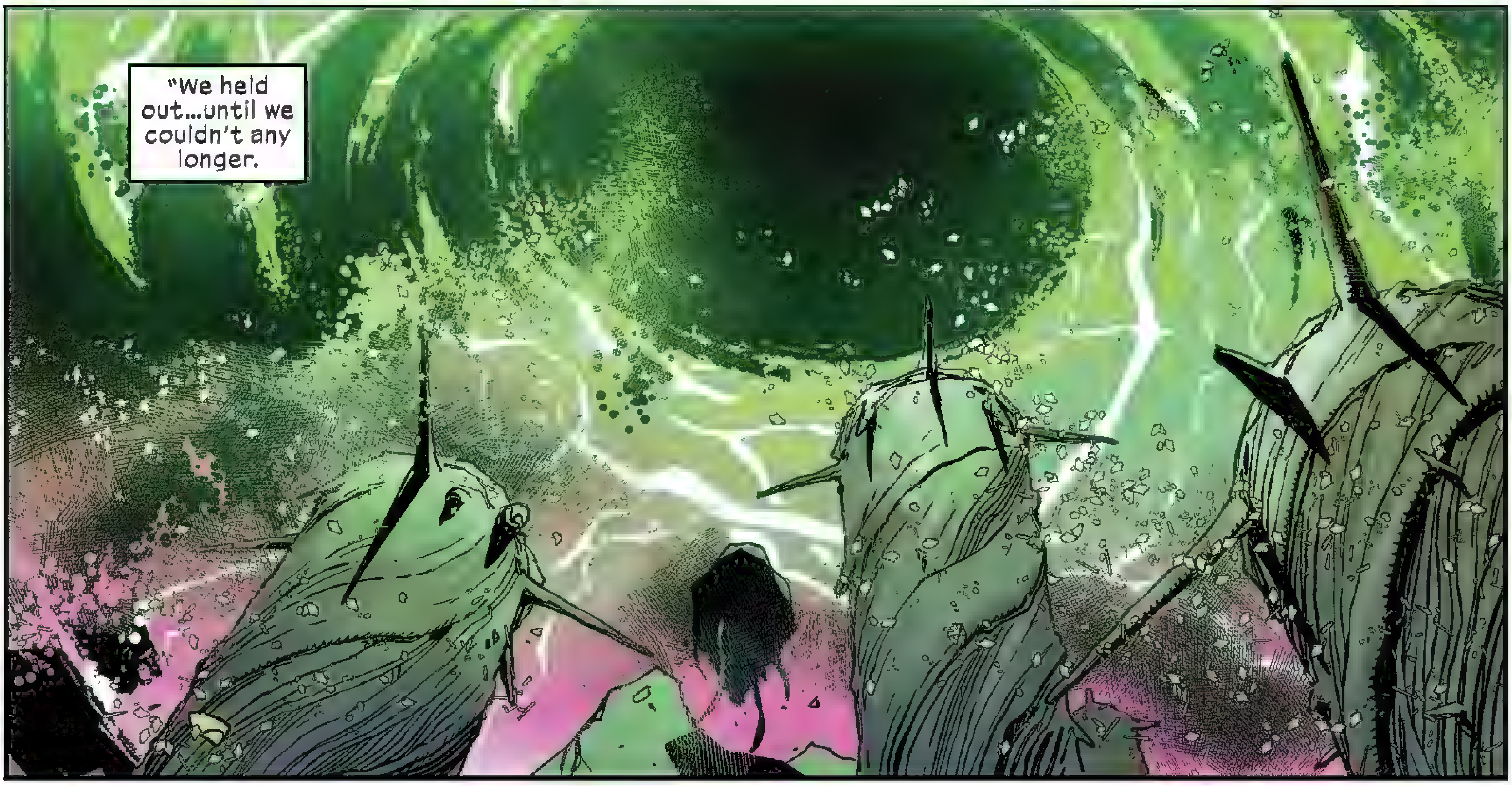
"All we know for sure is this:
"They battled to the death with the fate of Arakko in the balance.
"They battled...and Genesis was found wanting. Defeated. Unfit. And buried.
"And buried with her was all hope for Arakko.

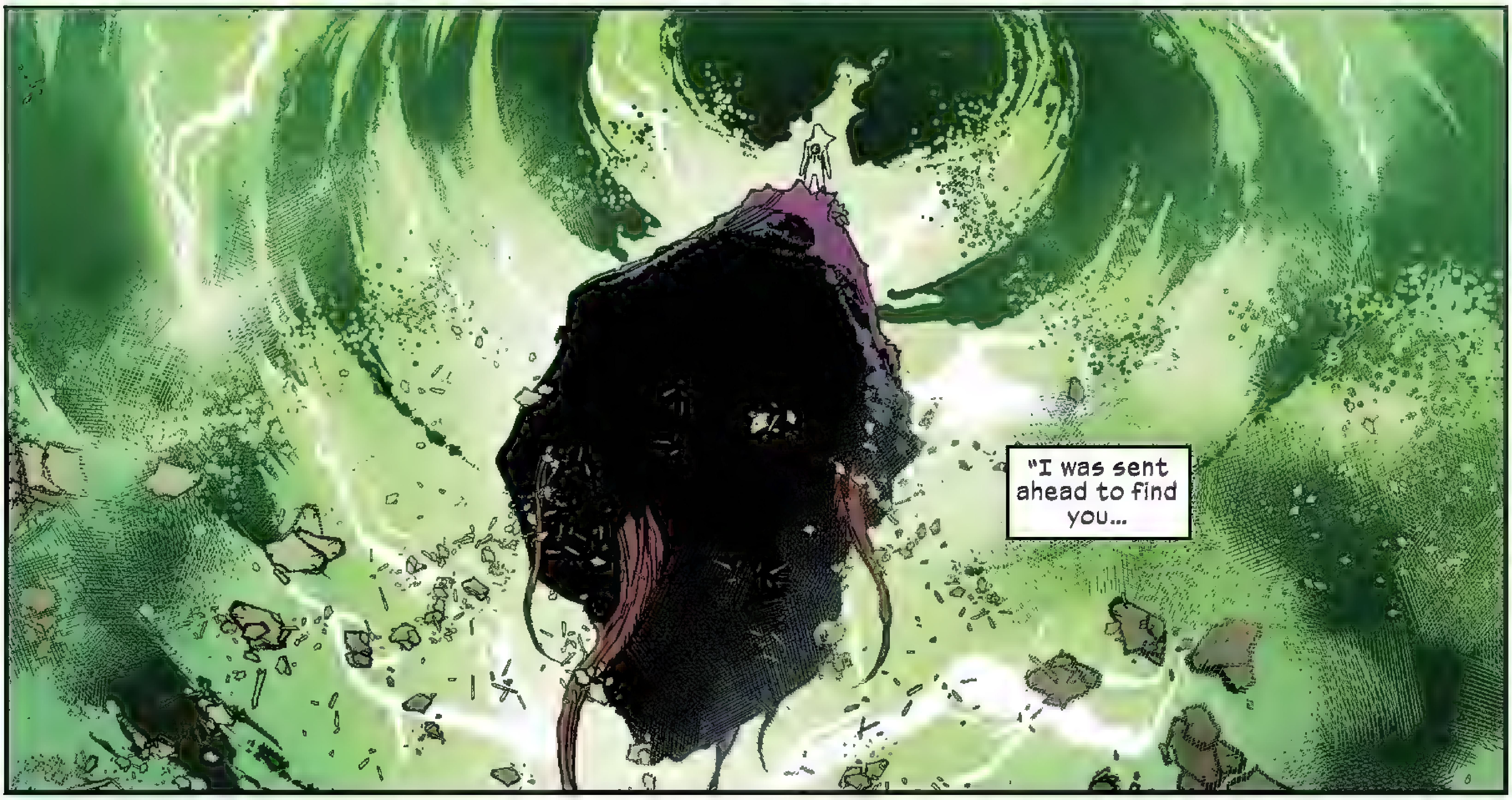

"You see, their god is called Annihilation for a reason.


"For one hundred years, the mad horde--the true might of Amenth--battered the walls of Arakko.

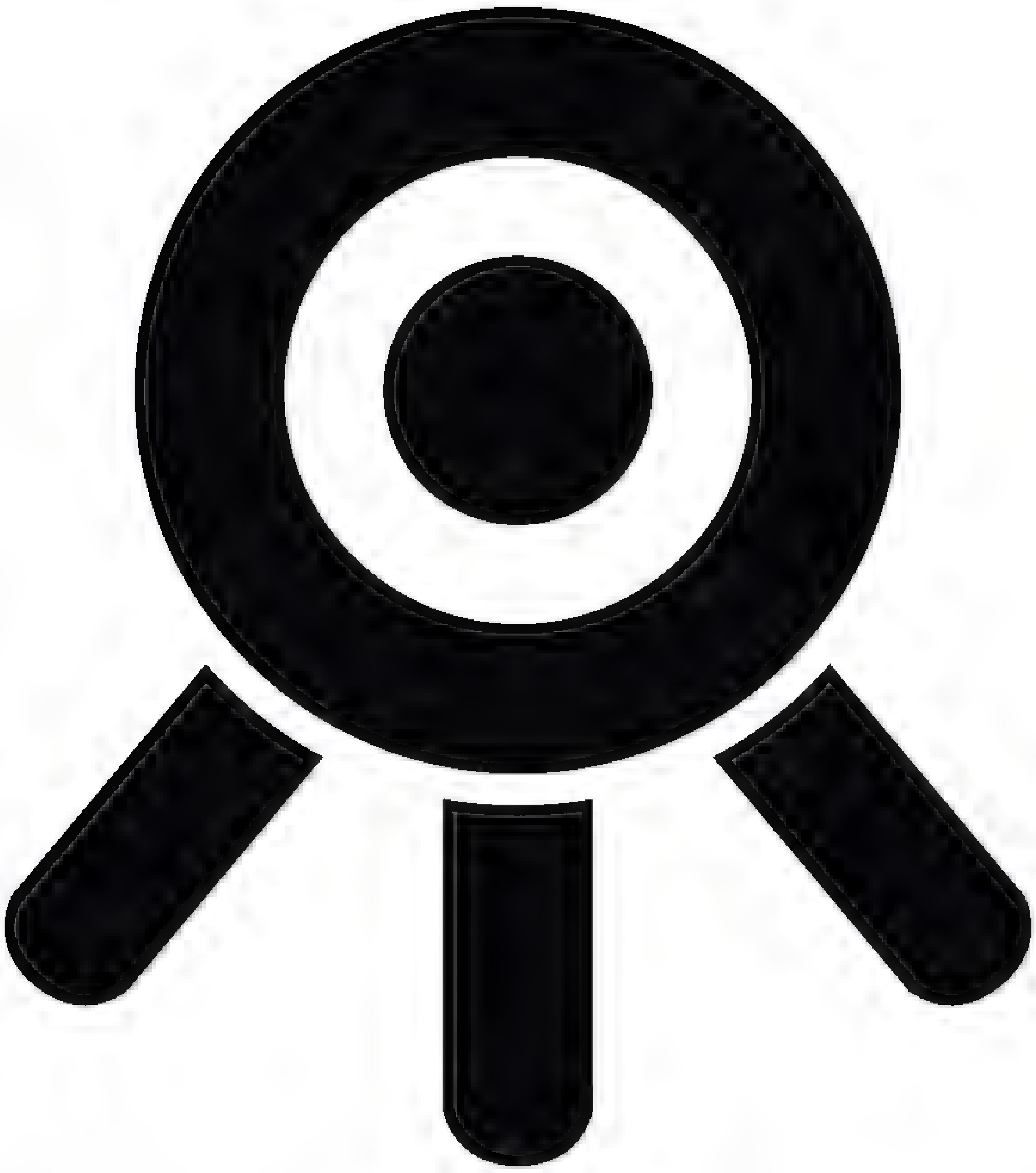

"Mutants died. Towers fell.
"But somehow... we held.


"Because there was still hope--hope that somewhere out there you had raised a new mutant society, a greater one--and with it, a mutant army that could save us all.


"We held out...until we couldn't any longer.


"I was sent ahead to find you...

"Others sought out a different kind of salvation...
"But I know nothing of their success or failure...
"I only know the last words of War--*of farewell and an under siege Arakko.*
"Grandfather--great Apocalypse--we are out of time.
"Amenth is on the march...
"...and only you can ***save us.***"

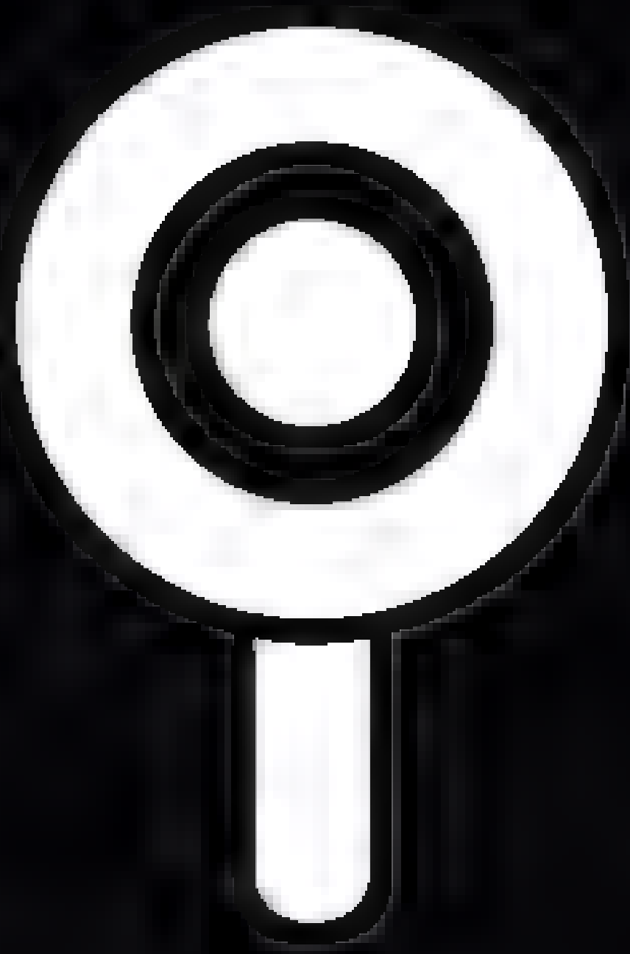


SUMMONERS OF AMENTH

Behold the power of the Summoner school of Amenth. They are nameless adepts and ageless wizards of the black world and can touch that dark place hidden to most practitioners.

Know a Summoner by their mark, which they must wear at all times. See the mark and know them -- not by any other sight, any words or any deeds.

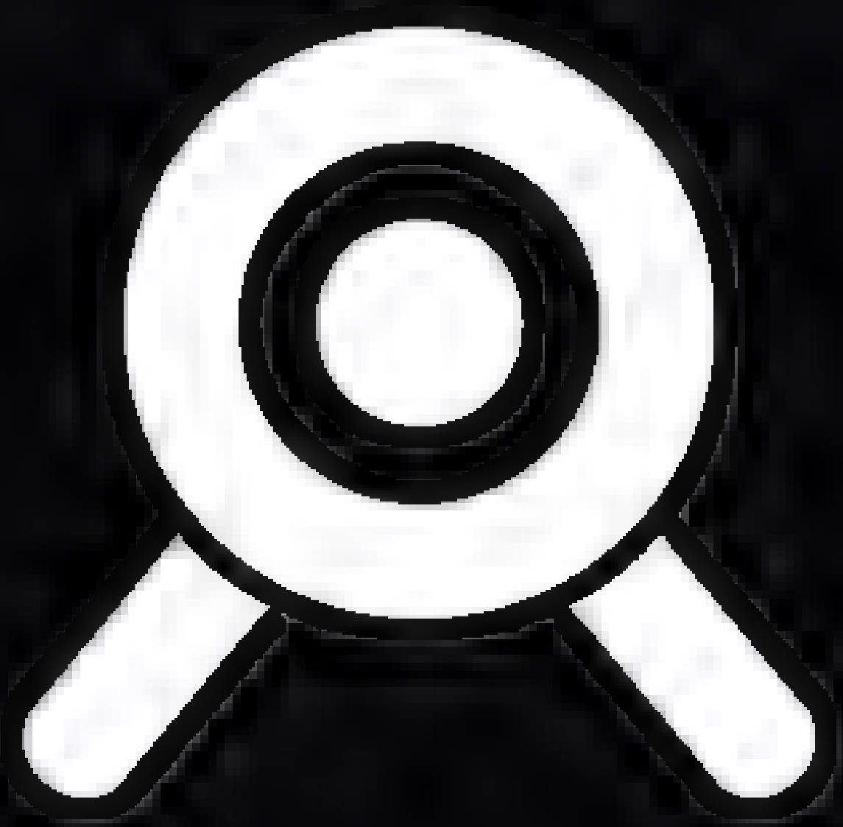
They serve an alien power. A lure deeper than their connection to the waking world. Remember this, and act accordingly.



SUMMONER MINOR

Traditional Number:
600 [CURRENTLY: 350]

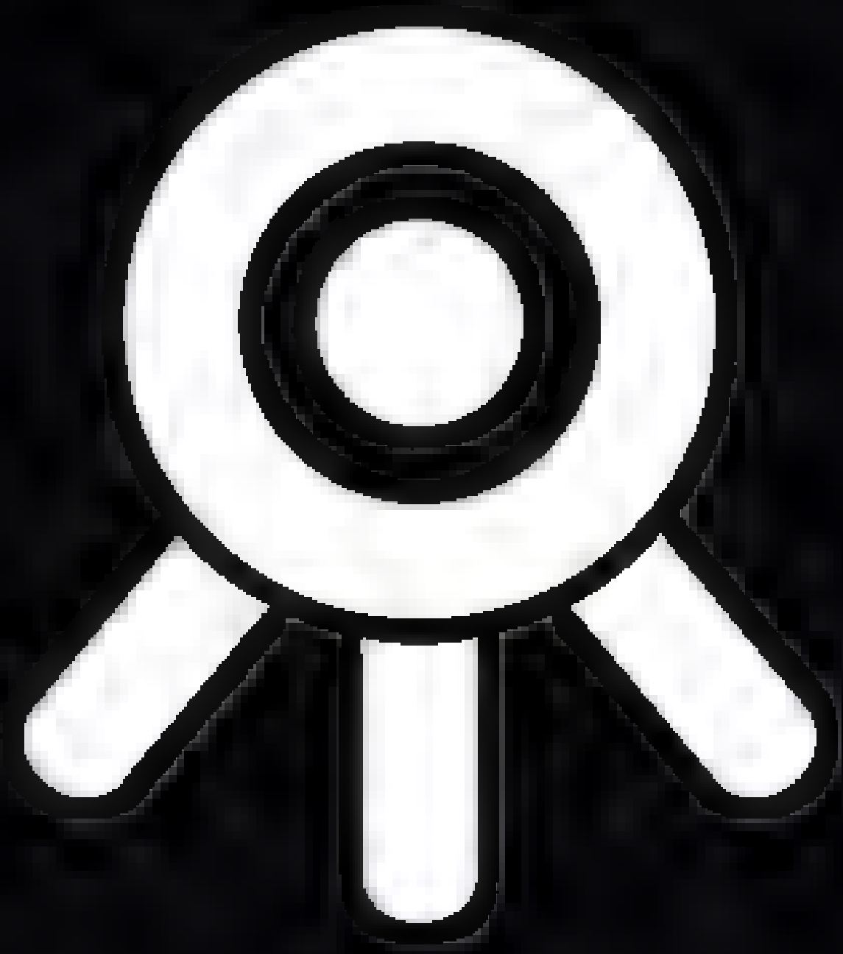
Able to summon a single host or minor deamon.



SUMMONER ADEPT

Number:
30 [CURRENTLY: 22]

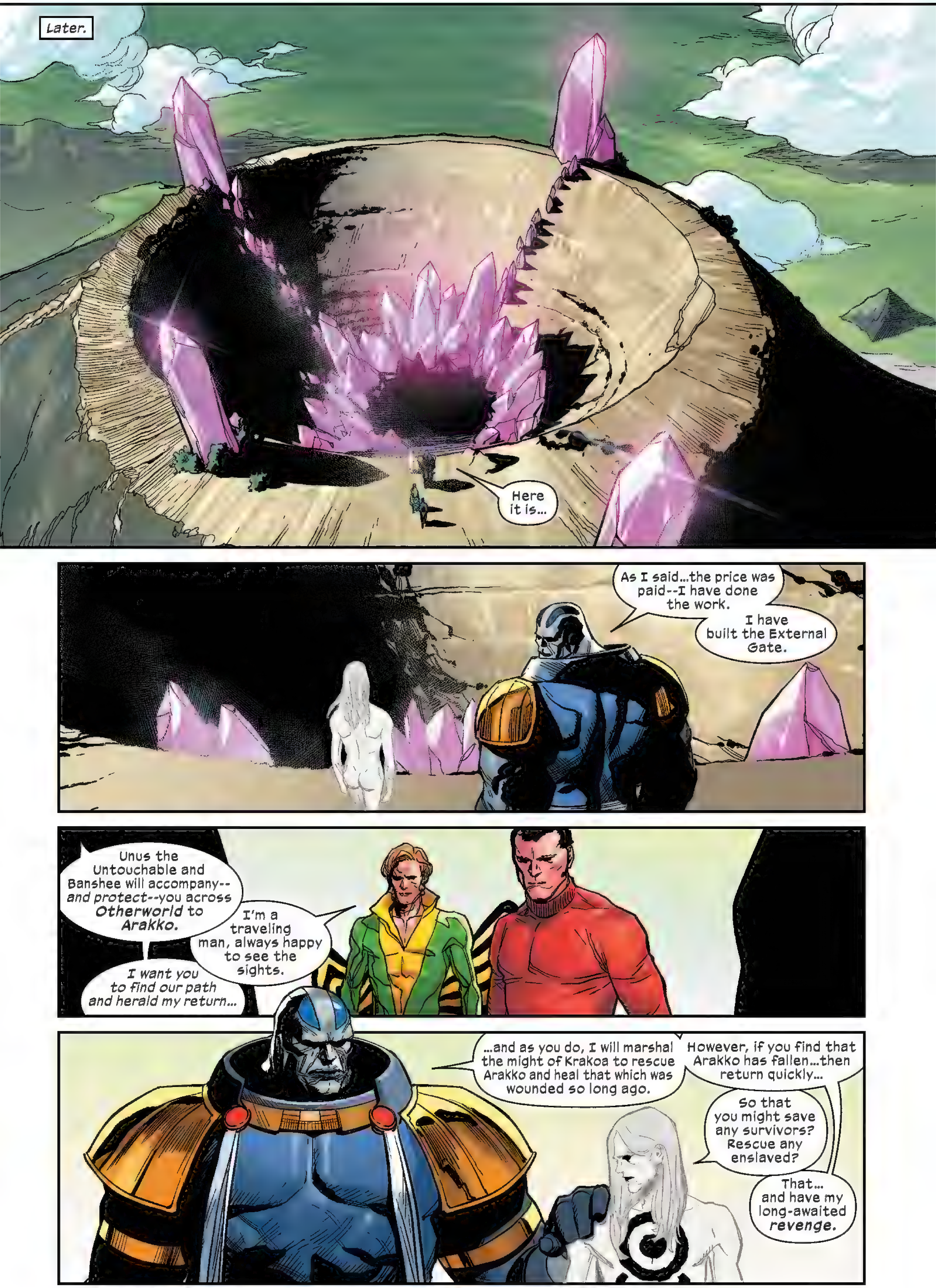
Able to summon a small horde of minor deamons or one major elemental.

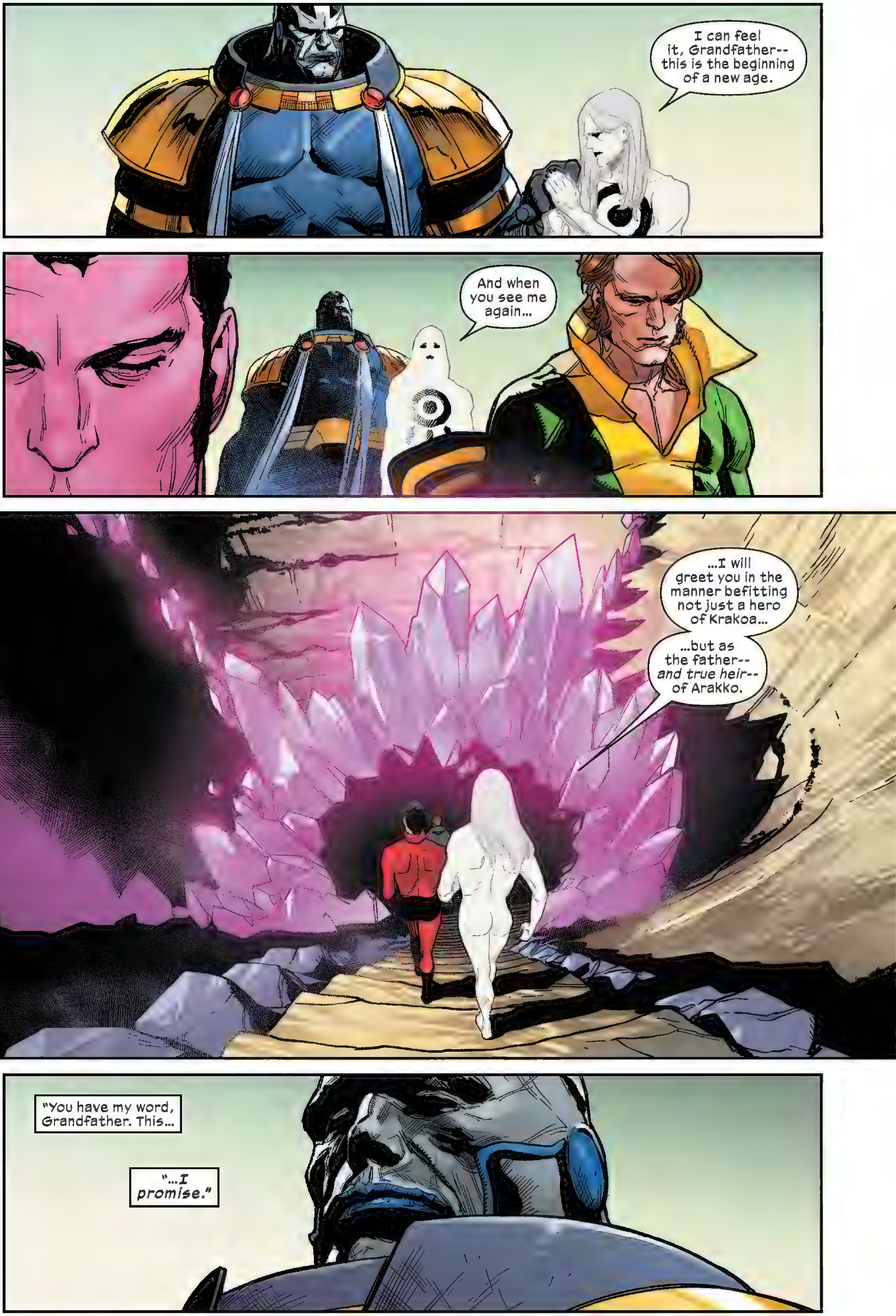


HIGH SUMMONER

Number:
3 [CURRENTLY: 2]

Able to summon a horde of elementals and up to three major deamons.


Later.
Here it is...
As I said...the price was paid--I have done the work.
I have built the External Gate.
Unus the Untouchable and Banshee will accompany--and protect--you across Otherworld to Arakko.
I'm a traveling man, always happy to see the sights.
I want you to find our path and herald my return...
...and as you do, I will marshal the might of Krakoa to rescue Arakko and heal that which was wounded so long ago.
However, if you find that Arakko has fallen...then return quickly...
So that you might save any survivors? Rescue any enslaved?
That... and have my long-awaited revenge.


I can feel it, Grandfather-- this is the beginning of a new age.
And when you see me again...
...I will greet you in the manner befitting not just a hero of Krakoa...
...but as the father-- *and true heir--* of Arakko.
"You have my word, Grandfather. This...
"...*I promise.*"

[oth_[0.1]
[er__[0.1]

All I see, I own.

And I am *unsatisfied* with
the *state of things*.

- SATURNYNE

[wor_[2.1]
[ld__[4.1]

[ara_[5.1]....]
[kko_[7.1]....]

[Dryador_falls]

Del Di'Lorr. The last watchtower. The Kingdom of Dryador. Otherworld.
Del Di'Lorr, the light in the distance. The last hope of a lost land. *How many times did she refuse our call?*
That tower...it *offends me.* It has *always offended* me.
And how long has it been since we have eaten well--on the bones and blood of the free people of a free land? Too long, I say...
For they *offend me.* They have *always offended* me.
Did you know that in their language, "Di'Lorr" means "the Light Forever"?
That's some bold claim.

It's a fool's claim. Everything raised is only for a season. If there's one thing we are proof of... *it's that.*
I say let the wolves run--*let the tower fall.*
Say the word and I will give you *war.*
Death. Death for all of them.
We will litter the path to Krakoa with the bodies of all who stand against us.
For there is an *apocalypse* coming.

The Watchtower Keep. Del Di'Lorr.
M'lord, dire news!
Word from the wall! *Disaster!*
How bad?
They have collapsed the outer ring, and they're pouring into the city.
I cannot say how long this keep will hold--but the tower will fall...
You have to leave.
Am I not called the cursed king? I have outlived three queens with not a child among them.
I have no line to protect or preserve, so if my kingdom falls, then its king--*cursed as I am*--will fall with it.
M'lord...we are all there is between here and the Starlight Citadel.
We are *her* vassals--we have to--
Yes, of course. You!
Squire!
Yes, m'lord?
Take this to ***Saturnyne.*** It will mark you as my herald.
Let her know what has happened here. Let her know what is coming.
I will not fail you, m'lord.
See that you don't...

"All of Otherworld depends on it."
Do you see?
They're sending some fool to announce the great work we have done here today.
Do we want word getting out?
Only if that *word* is *truth.*
Put your mark on him, sister.
Hmmmm. I have something for you, child...
"A little gift... to send you on your way."
Hrrkk!
"Let them know...we are coming."

X OF SWORDS: CREATION #1

[XOS] [XOS-CR1]

HICKMAN
HOWARD
LARRAZ
GRACIA

CREATION

PART 01 OF 22

CHAPTER

01

Mutantkind has a new home: Krakoa — an island where the past is left behind and the future is free of fear. From lifesaving medications to the miracle of resurrection, the Krakoan nation represents promise and possibility for its people.

But nothing is new. No past completely erased, no future without a dark cloud on its horizon.

Memory is long. History is longer. And the truth will outlast both.

[XOS] [XOS-CR1]

CREATION

Angel

Annihilation

Apocalypse

Banshee

Beast

Brian Braddock

Cable

Captain Britain

Charles Xavier

Cyclops

Cypher

Dr. Cecilia Reyes

Egg

Elixir

Emma Frost

Empath

Exodus

Gorgon

Greycrow

Havok

Healer

Hope

Jamie Braddock

Jean Grey

Jubilee

Kate Pryde

Magik

Magneto

Monet

Mr. Sinister

Nanny

Nightcrawler

Orphan Maker

Polaris

Princess Shuri

Proteus

Psylocke

Rachel Summers

Rictor

Rockslide

Saturnyne

Sebastian Shaw

Siryn

Storm

Summoner

Tempus

Warlock

Wild Child

Wolverine

Later.
The Starlight Citadel.
Stay clear, your majesty--take care not to touch...
The attendants who found him and brought him here are already dead. Yes, his wounds are going to kill him, but his touch could kill you.
He is... diseased.
The walls have fallen. The tower will follow...
Yes. That's the scepter of Dryador. And yes, it does portend something ill on the horizon.
Listen. He's trying to say something.
The tower. Arakko
What is that? Say it again.
Arakko. The tower.
What? I can't--
The Tower has fallen!
Arakko HAS FALLEN!
... I need the cards.

Some forgotten place.
Some forsaken time.
See the slave sun, older than the old world, younger than the dead one...
She needs what's hidden there, Quaddeus Quo. *Summon it for me.*

ᚱᛊᚠᚷᚺᚦᚠᛇ ᚷᚺᚢᚢᚱᛒᚺᛗᚹᚷ
There you are.
Hidden in the very **heart** of it.
Don't be like that.
You shouldn't think of this as your end but as the fulfillment of what you are meant to be.
You are, however, not going to be any good to us like that, are you now?
ᚱᛖᛉᛇᚠᛒ ᚷᚺᚢᚢᚱᛒᚺᛗᚹᚷ

Better.
Now, let's not keep her *waiting.*
Nonsense, Quo...
"This is *who* we are.
"We serve at the pleasure of **Saturnyne**--a star is a small price to pay for such favor."

THE STARLIGHT CITADEL

[BLGTH]. .. ..[000]
[SPOKE]... .. . . [INF]

“Wars rage and kings die, the wheel turns the world around
Bones break beneath the wheel, the king he tumbles to the ground
The wheel’s center never changes, never knows the lives she take
Still she sits, as smooth and placid, our lady’s face a peaceful lake.”

-- Avalon children’s rhyme

Floating high above the central diplomatic zone of Otherworld is the *Starlight Citadel,* physical manifestation of the epicenter of the Otherworld, where all realities intersect. If Otherworld were said to be a wheel, the Citadel would be its hub -- though it is unmoving, without it, the wheel cannot turn.

The Citadel is more than simply a beautiful monument; it is a fortress serving as the defense of the infinite doors within. Each doorway serves as passage to another reality -- making the Citadel the most literal representation of the conjunction of all realities that Otherworld represents.

Previously, each of these doors had its own defender and representative in the form of a Captain Britain. However, when the original Captain Britain Corps was destroyed, these portals found themselves without defenders, leaving the Citadel -- and thus, the nexus of all realities -- highly vulnerable to exterior attacks.

It is believed that around this time *Opal Luna Saturnyne,* Omniversal Majestrix and High Priestess of the Starlight Citadel, took up permanent residence in the Citadel and sealed it off to anyone but her Priestesses in an act of desperate defense. Saturnyne’s swift and decisive action kept the Citadel safe and standing during attacks by the witch Morgan Le Fay.

The Citadel’s known defenses include the highly trained Priestesses of the White, bow-wielding assassins with long-distance aim and high-speed flight. The Citadel’s current siege fortifications and other defenses are unknown.

Currently, the Starlight Citadel is easiest reached from Krakoa by way of the **External Gate.**

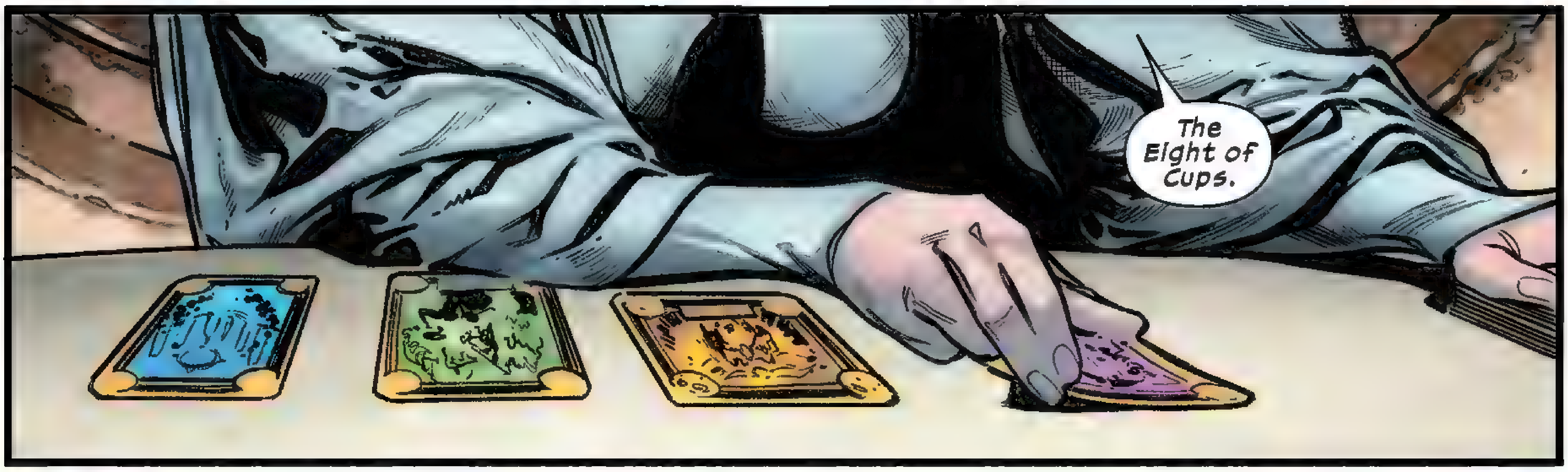
She is Opal Luna Saturnyne.
Omniversal Majestrix.
The rightful ruler of Otherworld.
The white light of both Fair and Foul Kingdoms.
The eternal seat of the Starlight Citadel.
Chu-CHUNK

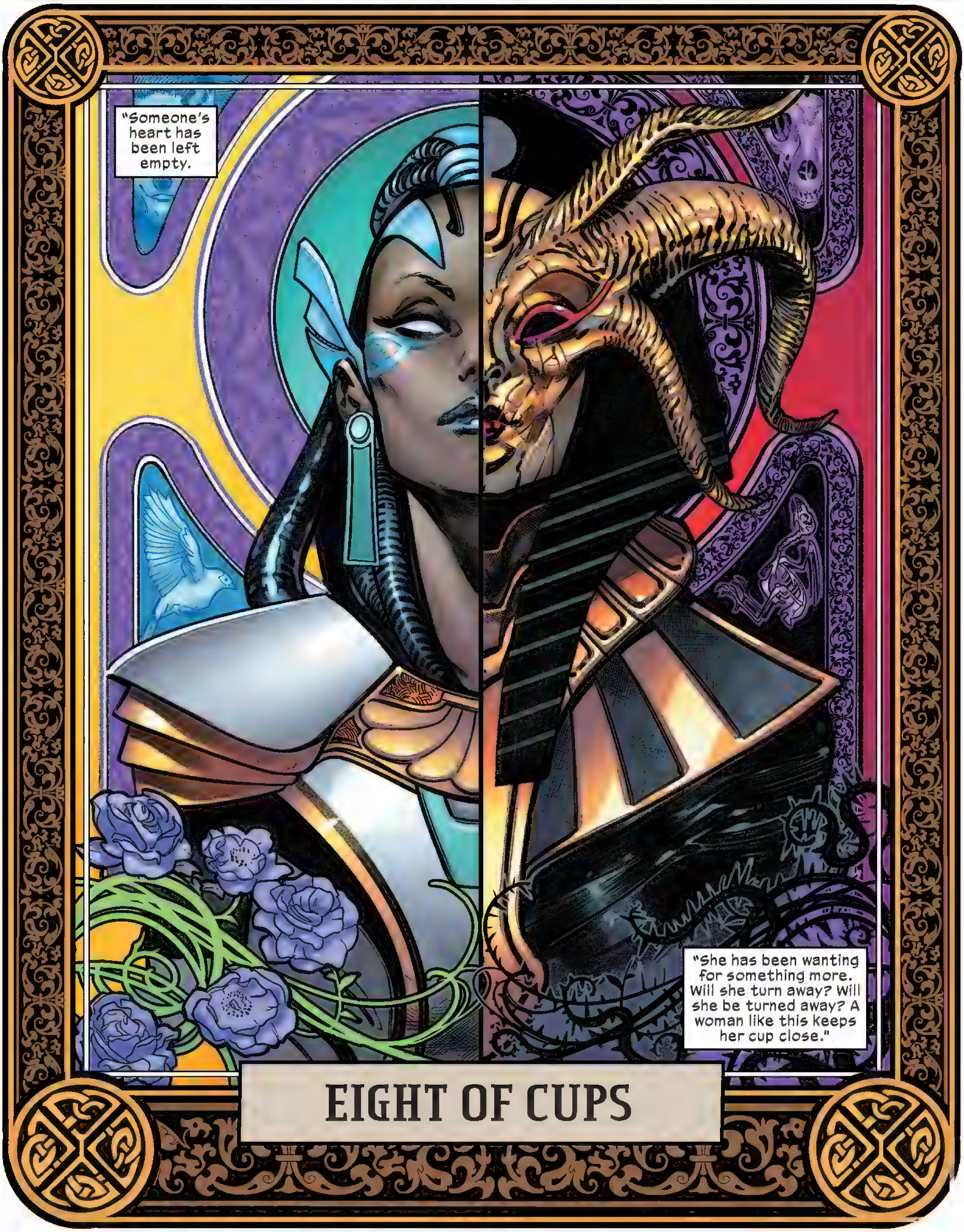
This place is the brilliant center of all universes...
...yet we are *covered* in *darkness.*
Some clouding of tomorrow by the fire and ash of war...
WHHRZZ
...the spoils of the split land and conflict that lies between them.
I am *blind,* but I would *see...*
...so let's see what the future holds...
Shall we?

Judgment.
"The death of death and the new way forward.
"The witchbreed bring back their own dead now. Have they considered what else from the past awakens in the earth? What rises to face those who call themselves immortal?"
JUDGMENT

The Four of Wands.
"A family that has been fighting for eons has one final confrontation before they rest over the ashes of the defeated.
"They crave the last battle and the spoils of victory.
"They have built a hard home, and one must dwell within."
FOUR OF WANDS

The Hanged Man.
"Here, no men hang, but something has been suspended indeed. Time? Natural laws and earthly attachments?
"They bring themselves here to the game at the gallows. What do they wager to lose?"
THE HANGED MAN


The Eight of Cups.


"Someone's heart has been left empty.
"She has been wanting for something more. Will she turn away? Will she be turned away? A woman like this keeps her cup close."
EIGHT OF CUPS

The Ten of Swords.
"Ah, here it is then. My light in the darkness. Something I have long desired flickers just out of my reach.
"But for the ones who hold the blades...
"...a great match lights the darkness indeed..."
TEN OF SWORDS

DOES THIS FORTUNE BELONG TO YOU?

A READING FROM MARIE-ANGE COLBERT
MUTANT NAME: TAROT

[Krakoa]..............[TAR]
[......]..............[OT_]

I drew a very strange reading of the cards last night.

It is clearly *très important*, because I pulled it more than once. When I saw it the first time, I had more questions, so I shuffled the tarot and asked the cards again -- what was the message? Could they tell me more?

And when I dealt the cards, they did not tell me more. Instead, they dealt themselves again -- the same five cards as the reading before in the same order! One after another!

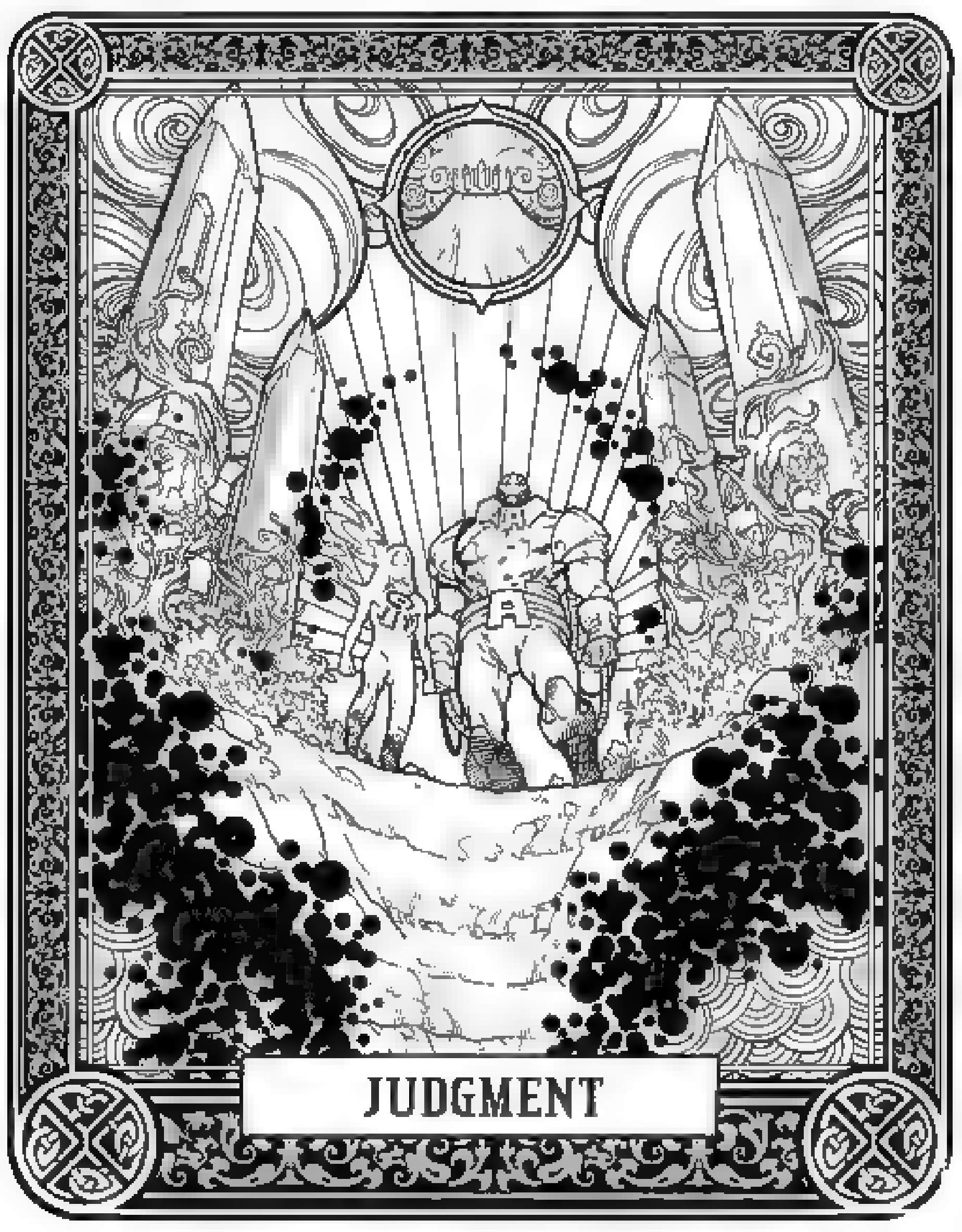
I shuffled the deck and dealt five again, asking for more guidance, but the cards would give no more. This message of five cards was all they had for me. In exhaustion, I called my cousin in Lyon, another expert in the cards but not *mutant* like us, and he said the strangest thing:

That he had pulled the very same cards that night. And so had his landlady's wife (another unexpected but welcome expert in the arcane).

The cards are often stubborn, and it is not anything surprising to have to ask them the same question more than once. But to make myself clear -- this is as likely as pulling the same hand of poker thrice in a row and then finding your cousin did the same.

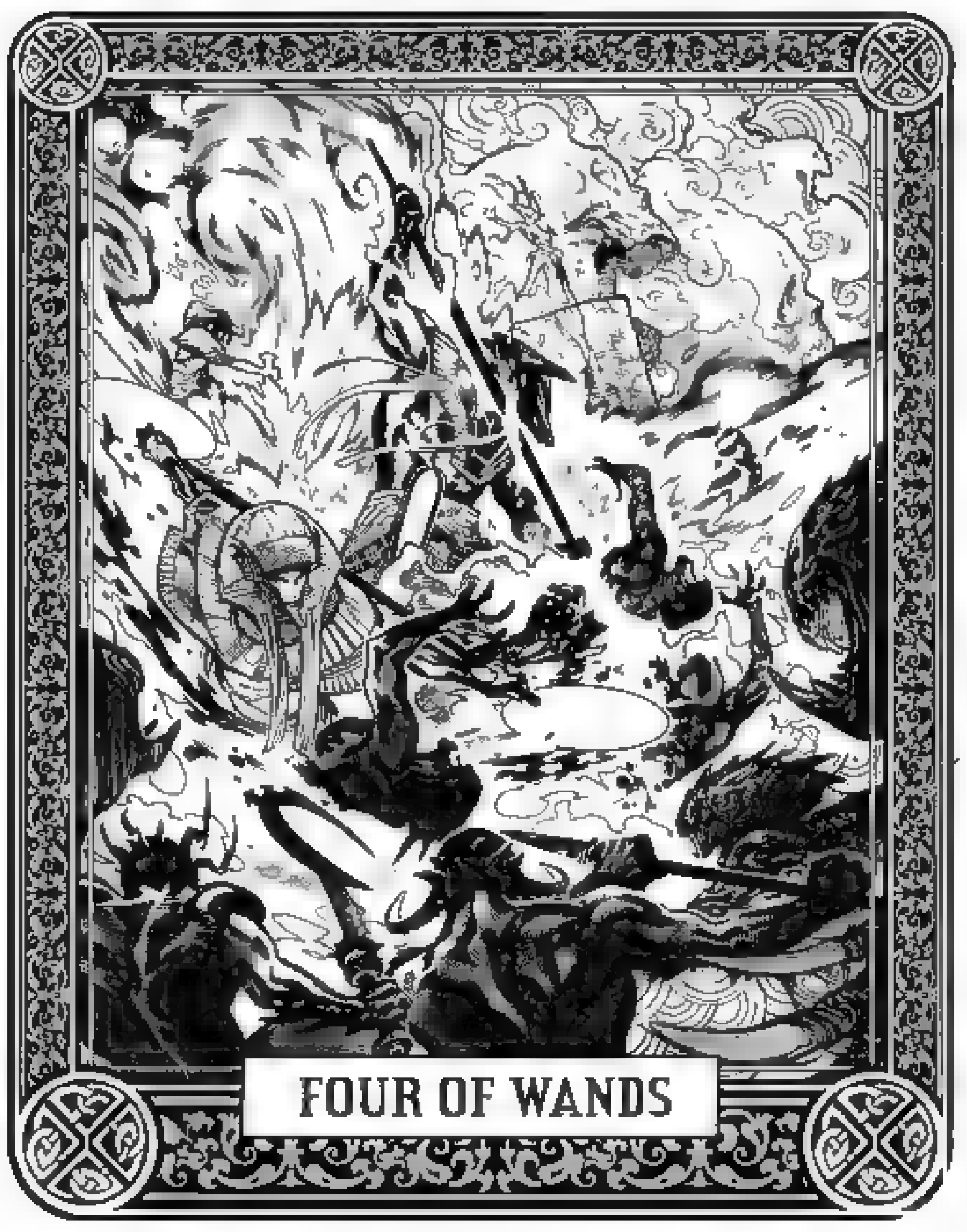
The message in the cards is clearly quite important for someone. I just hope it reaches them.

Here were the cards pulled. *Perhaps this means something to you?*



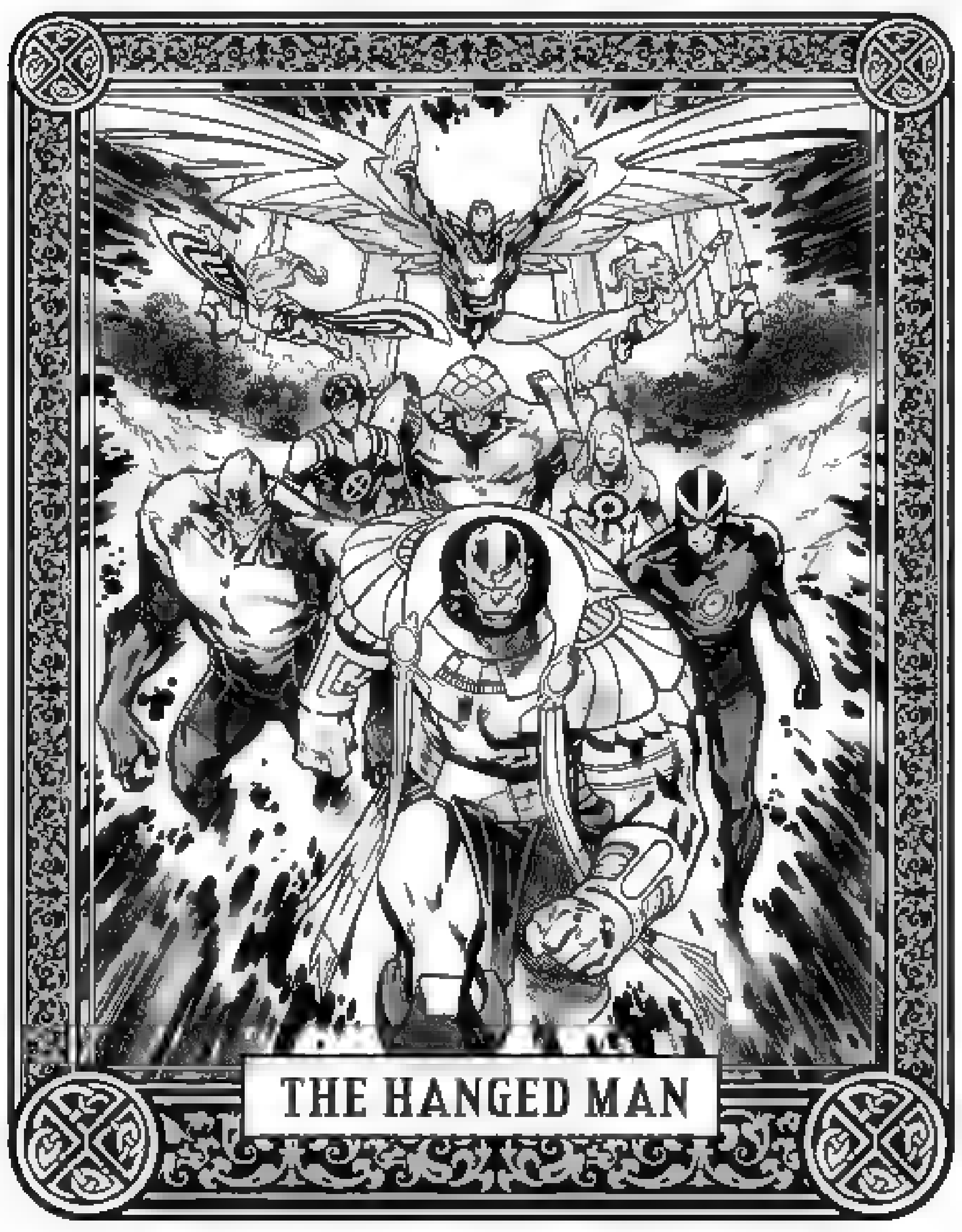
JUDGMENT

It is not a judgment in the way we think of it, but in the way the priests taught it in my youth -- Final Judgment and the rebirth of all in Heaven. It typically means spiritual growth, but I think it is funny -- rebirth is surely a gift of Krakoa, yes?



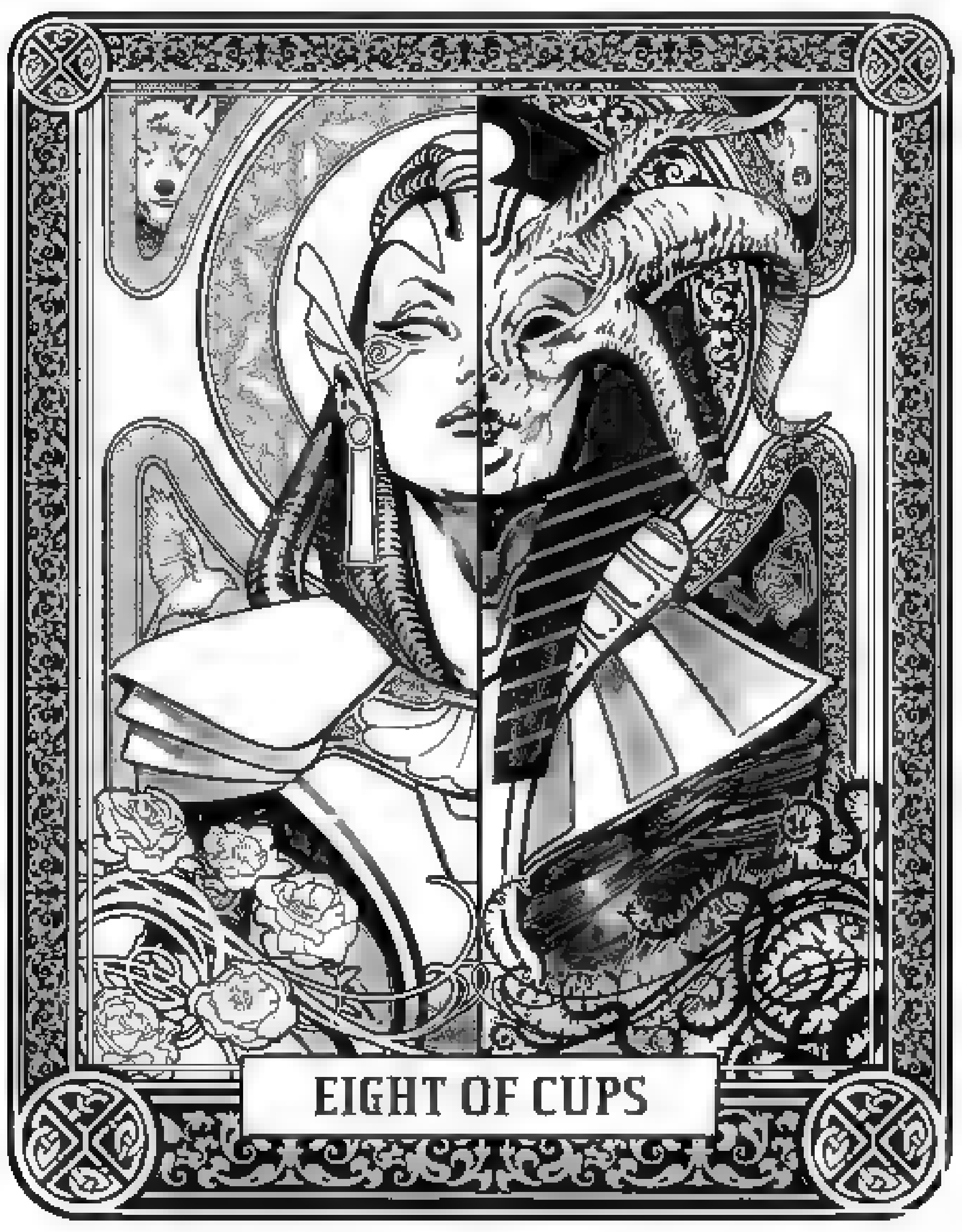
FOUR OF WANDS

This is a good card, yes. It can mean you have finished something or are returning to something. *D'une part*, four can be a good number for this sort of thing -- four walls make a house, *non*? *D'autre part*, the Xorn brothers would consider four quite an inauspicious number -- so it varies!



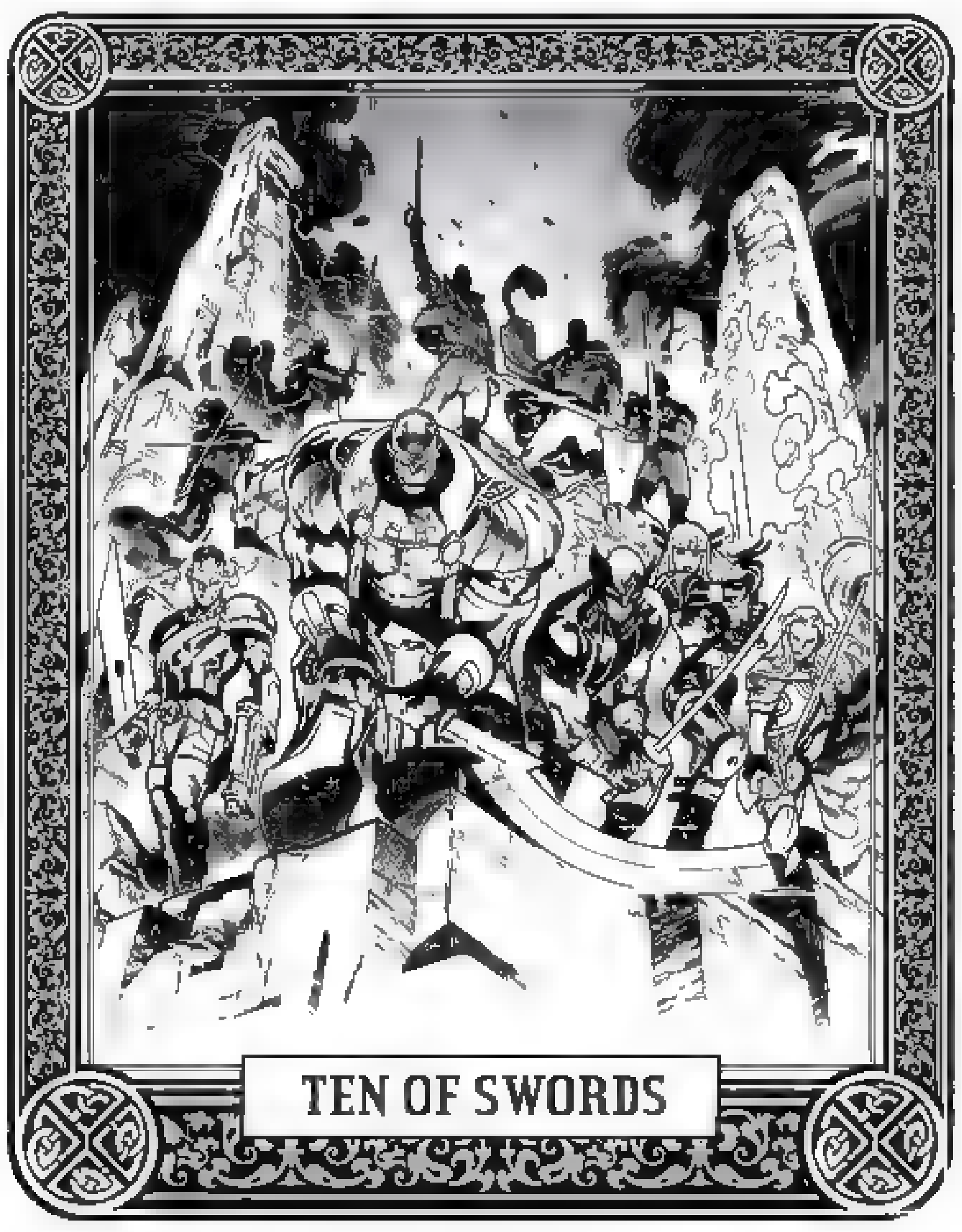
THE HANGED MAN

Well, you know how he got that way? He is hanging because he is sacrificing himself. Sometimes this one means you have to, ah, what is the phrase? *Kill your sweethearts* or something? These latter cards are less pleasant, it seems.



EIGHT OF CUPS

Ah, a sad card. In my deck, the cups are all overturned here on the picture. The person this reading is for, something is missing in their life. They must walk away...or perhaps they already have? This is a wound.



TEN OF SWORDS

Sometimes the darkest hour is before the dawn, yes? But also...sometimes it is simply darkness. I cannot be sure. In any case, what is causing you pain...the pain will be the worst you have ever felt. But then it will ...be gone. You will feel it no more.

Whomever this reading is meant for, I hope it reaches them. Things seem very serious.

- TAROT

The Arakko Point.
Krakoa.
The External Gate.
ZZZRNNNN
What's that sound?
Gate's opening. Something's coming through. *Friendly?*
Checking...
Yes.
But there's... there's also... *oh!*

Help me! Please!
Oh no...
"Banshee."
He's dying.

The Healing Gardens.
Gently...
Gently. His life force flickers. He's on the edge now...
I need you all to leave and let us work.
What happened?
We were ambushed in Otherworld--on the way to Arakko.
There is an army on the march, Grandfather. There is a war underway.
...
Come with me.

The Quiet Council.
Brothers and sisters, this the son of she who is my daughter, War--*a High Summoner from Arakko.*
We have... *troubling* news.
As you know, we recently constructed an External Gate on the Arakko remnant that joined with Krakoa.
"We" is a...generous way to put it, Apocalypse. As there was no...*we.*
You didn't ask anyone if you could do it, *you just did*--*and it may very well have cost mutant lives to do so.*
Mutants construct gateways all the time without bringing it to the Council. *Why ask for permission when none is needed?*
If I did not have Krakoa's blessing, then Krakoa would have stopped me.
Ask if you do not believe me.

Douglas.
Can you...?
Sure.
Really? *That's it?*
All right. *Damn.* You don't have to be that way about it.
Krakoa acknowledges and accepts the gift of the External Gate.
And my thanks in return to the island for refuge and providence.
As for all of you, you need to *understand.* There was once *one land--* **Okkara.**
"Then the Twilight Sword of the enemy tore the land asunder, and what was one became two:
"Krakoa and Arakko. And in the war that followed, Arakko was *lost.*
"Months ago, this blessed child and a remnant of that lost land returned to me...he sought me out and sang a refugee's song: ***Save us.***
"So I began building gates-- *experimenting*--in the hope that I could return and save them along with Krakoa's lost half.

I recently sent the Summoner back through to prepare my coming.
Please, child...tell the Council what happened.
Three. Three was our number...
"And three walked through the External Gate...
"I, a Summoner of Arakko, and two heroes of Krakoa--***Banshee,*** with a voice that can break mountains, and ***Unus,*** who cannot be touched by God or man.
"The other side of the gate opens at the center of Otherworld. When we emerged, we looked up and marveled at the sight of the Starlight Citadel in the sky.
"We were blinded by its majesty--*shamed by it*--for we did not see what waited on the horizon.
"It was the dark army that broke Arakko. Serving the Twilight Sword, they hate the living and love annihilation.
"They attacked us, and under the shadow of the Citadel, we fought. Bravely. *Foolishly.*
"Unus was captured, and Banshee was wounded. *I fled with him...*"
...and returned *here...*
I was to be a forerunner of a *new age of Apocalypse*--instead, I bring word of the fall of Arakko...
And my message is of the unavoidable end of this entire world.

Wonderful.
Perhaps there's a bit more illumination you can offer, En Sabah Nur?
A more proper assessment of the threat, *if you will?*
Thousands of years ago, I gave up half the world to stop these monsters.
All that cost was...my wife, my children and scores of god-like mutants whose names you have never heard--I surrendered everything to stop this. So... a proper assessment? ***The threat is real.***
Well, then. You opened the door.
Shut it.
And leave behind Unus?
To say nothing of the Citadel and what it represents? We cannot just...*ignore this.*
I'll get Scott.
He'll lead a rescue team through for Unus and--
No.
I will go.
Perfect. You walk through... and ***then*** we shut the door behind you.
I have to say, after a mundane start, this meeting is really picking up.
Am I alone in seeing an ashy tint in overcast heaven?
Something looms... something just beyond our ability to see, but it is there. ***I can feel it.***

Me too.
We shocked the world and now I fear that the world recovers. We gather enemies--*old and new*--at a fever pace...
Homines Verendi, the Flower Cartel, Xeno...
And Orchis. Don't forget Orchis.
Out there. Circling the sun, *waiting...*
Okay. I'm the only person in this room who hasn't walked through a gateway--*lucky me*--so maybe I'm missing some nuance of the situation...
But if we're worried about being vulnerable--*and we need to close the larger gate*--doesn't that still leave us another way to get to Otherworld?
A gateway to Avalon exists. Jamie Braddock--the omega mutant *Monarch*-- sits on the throne.
It *is* a vassal state of the Citadel and offers us access to most of Otherworld.
Then why the second, larger gate?
It's different.
Like other gates, it remains open at all times--but unlike those, Krakoa does not have full control of the External Gate...
And I'm beginning to suspect that ***access*** is not limited to ***mutants.***
Then we should destroy it.
Now.
Agreed.
Shall we play democracy?
A show of hands, perhaps?

It's enough. I'm sorry, Apocalypse. But you should have--
Excuse me.
Yes, Douglas?
Krakoa says the External Gate must stay open.
What?
"You need to understand, you are guests here. Our coexistence is collaborative and wonderful. It's a union of shared interests...
"...but I am the land. And the land is mine."
Please tell Krakoa that we apologize for speaking of his person in that way--we respect any decision he makes. Of course.
I understand the lure--the dream--of the reunification of Krakoa and Arakko, but it seems as if Arakko has fallen to a dark enemy and now only you remain.
So please, ask Krakoa to consider our new union and both our safety and his.

Okay. Nice speech. But...
"Unless there is a greater known threat...the gate stays open."
You expected this?
Yes. After all, the island and I want the same thing.
Understand, whatever you are getting ready to do...
...you do it without the authority of this Council and you do it without our blessing.
Of course.
I will ask for volunteers.

The External Gate.
Hey there.
I wonder-- how many times are we going to step blindly through some door and upend our lives?
Cost of doing business. Right?
I take it Magneto asked you to come?
"The strength of the House of M must never be questioned."
You?
As this is all extra-Council, Scott couldn't really come, so he asked me to keep an eye on things.
So here I am...
"Blind as can be."
Quite an unusual gathering, wouldn't you say? Rictor's got something going on with Apocalypse I don't understand, but they're inseparable. Same thing with Rockslide and the Summoner.
Siryn insisted on coming after what happened to Banshee. And you? Curiosity get you again, Hank?

Oh, I'm a creature of habit. *You,* however...
I know. But all this talk from Apocalypse of hidden lands and secret histories...
Even though these are new days for us all...I still don't trust him. ***I never will.*** So I have to be here.
I suppose all that leaves is her...
"Whatever in the world is Monet thinking?"
Have you ever been to Otherworld, child?
Ventured into the unseen lands--felt the invisible hand of the Starlight Citadel as she moves the infinite?
No. I haven't.
Then why are you joining us?
Honestly? Feels like a job I might want down the road.
So are we doing this or what?

[00.08]
[00.15]

MAP OF OTHERWORLD

EARTH	[01]
AMENTH	[02]
KRAKOA	[03]
ARAKKO	[04]
AVALON GATE	[05]
DRYADOR RIFT	[06]
STARLIGHT CITADEL	[07]
EXTERNAL GATE	[08]
FAIR COURTS	
THE FLOATING KINGDOM OF ROMA REGINA	[09]
INFURI, THE EVERFORGE	[10]
AVALON	[11]
SEVALITH	[12]
MERCATOR	[13]
FOUL COURTS	
THE HOLY REPUBLIC OF FAE	[14]
HOTHIVE	[15]
DRYADOR [FALLEN]	[16]
BLIGHTSPOKE	[17]
THE CROOKED MARKET	[18]

[KRAKOA.........][00]
[AVALON.........][00]
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[ARAKKO........][01]
[DRYADOR.......][01]

[_opal]..................[10]
[_luna]..................[10]
[01]
[03]
[05]
[11]
[10]
[12]
DIPLOMATIC RING
[09]
[13]
[08]
[07]
[14]
[18]
AMBASSADORS
KINGDOM EMBASSIES /
[15]
[17]
[16]
[06]
[04]
[02]
[satur]... .. . . [10]
[_nyne]..................[10]

OTHERWORLD KINGDOMS

[Omnıve] .. .. [rsa]
[..]. ... .. [lmg]

STARLIGHT CITADEL

Regent: Opal Luna Saturnyne

FAIR COURTS

THE FLOATING KINGDOM OF ROMA REGINA
Regent: Roma Regina

INFURI
THE EVERFORGE
Regent: Forgemaster Federal - Fury 005

AVALON
Regent: Monarch

SEVALITH
Regents: Countex Oublia and Countex Oscura

MERCATOR
Regent: [Unknown]

FOUL COURTS

THE HOLY REPUBLIC OF FAE
Regent: Merlyn

HOTHIVE
Regent: Vesperidae, Colony Queen

DRYADOR
Regent: [Vacant]

BLIGHTSPOKE
Regent: [Unknown]

THE CROOKED MARKET
Regent: Mad Jim Jaspers

[FAIR]..................[001]
[FOUL]..................[005]

The Healing Gardens.
I know that look.
Looks like trouble.
The Healer says he'll recover. He's supposed to be resting, but his mind...it's...it's...
Yeah. I feel it. This Banshee's screaming.
You're gonna take a look, aren't you?
Will you help me?
Sure. I'm in.

The External Gate.
What are you smiling at?
You. It's good to see you in this form and not the other--to see you as you really are.
What I made you--an angel of death.
You know what's always blown my mind?
That you think that you can just...be you, and there's no end to it.
Our sins find us out, Apocalypse.
One cannot call something a sin when it's a righteous work being done.
That right there...that's exactly what I'm talking about.
The lie that if you think it matters then it's okay if someone else pays...

Otherworld.
Is there nothing you've done you regret?
Look there!
"Unus...he's their prisoner."
My god...

"...to see such a thing with these ancient eyes."
You asked me if there was anything I regret...
This. This I regret.
Who are they?
My light. My life...
Something lost I dared not believe to find. My sons...my daughters...
They are *my children.*

Krakoa.
I think...
I think... we're...
Yes. We're in.
Yeah. There they are. They've just exited the External Gate.
These memories... there's something off.
Can you feel it?
Yes. It's overwhelming...
Something's wrong here.

Otherworld.
I have no words. I can't...
I can't believe...
...that this is real--*that you live*--it is more than I hoped for...
This...has always been *my dream.*
Father, please...
Stand.
We want to see you how we remember you.
As a *titan.*
As a *god.*
...
Of course.
I have so many things I want to say. I have so many questions.
Yes?
Tell me of Arakko. If it fell, by what miracle have you returned to me?

I wouldn't call the hell we've endured a miracle, Father.
Far from it.
And... your mother. Summoner told me that she is...
Gone. Destroyed.
She fell under the Twilight Blade.
If it eases your pain, there was no avoiding it--*it was always going to end the way it did.* You have no idea what thousands of years of war in that place is like.
It could break the strongest of us.
I'm...I'm sorry.
Regret is for the weak, and we were born strong. In that place, only the fit survive...and here we are.
Would you like to know the one thing that kept us alive all those years?
I'll tell you...
It wasn't love.

Krakoa.
This is it. The memory we're looking for.
Oh god. It's worse than we thought...
The Summoner...he betrayed them. *I'm going to--*
Shhh. Pay attention. I'm going *deeper.*

I see you looking, mutant...
...but you're looking for the wrong thing.
There is a great game afoot. And if you want to *play*... if you want to *win*...
...then this is what you ***want.*** This is what you'll ***need.***
Find it.
Could you see that? Did you see what she showed us?
Yeah.
Go find Mom and Dad-- *show them.*
What about--
I'm going to stay here and go back into Banshee's head to see if there's anything else locked away.

Otherworld.
Saturnyne...
Saturnyne. We need you.
Yes, Ryl. I heard you. I'm back.
Is it time?
I believe so. But only you can truly say, Majestrix...
And if you'll please forgive my candor, I wonder how the raging war below-- *the rumble and thunder of death*--has so thoroughly escaped your attention.
I was in some other realm. At some other time. In some poor fool's head...
Moving things as I see fit. This is a delicate work--a fine thread that demands singular focus and does not tolerate distraction.
You call an army a distraction?
You see an army...
I see pawns.
It's just as the cards said. The Hanged Man was drawn...
The Krakoans have come.
Tell me, are you going to help them?
Hmmmm.

We need to get Apocalypse back through the gate!
You can't save him, *friend.*
He cannot be saved.
Don't call me friend.
How could you do this? *Why would you?*
I am a summoner of many things.
Most of all... *lies.*
We played a game once, friend...

Now it ends.
This is a disaster!
Look on the bright side--how could things get any worse?
HRRK!
Alex! Time for a tactical retreat!
You go!
Get help! We'll stay here and make sure no one gets through the gate. But hurry, Hank!
Hurry!

The Summer House.
Mom! Dad!
I need you!
What is it, son?
Banshee-came-back-from-Otherworld-and-he's-hurt-bad-and-Rachel-and-I-were-looking-through-his-memories-to-find-out-what-happened-and-when-we-did-there-was-this-woman-who-saw-us-and-showed-us-something-we-have-to-find-and-and... just...
Just take a look.
There. Do you see it?
"Do you know what it is?"
No. I don't.
I do. And I know something more important than what it is...
...where to find it.

Otherworld.
Nice ivory tower... I wonder why they don't come down to help.
Maybe you should invite them to join us?
Good idea.
People call me cold...
But, lady, this takes the cake. You've turned war into a spectator sport. Are you really going to sit there and watch your kingdom get ravaged...
...and do nothing about it?
I'll do what I please, child.
And I can promise, it won't have anything to do with the whims of you or any of your kind.
Now...

Run along.
Owww!
No luck?
That is...*not* a nice woman.
Well...maybe she needs some encouragement to do the right thing.
That Citadel's a mighty big piece of floating metal, Lorna...
We sent them an invitation... let's make it a request.
GRRRRRNNNN

Earth.
So where is this thing located?
In a place we can't get to through a gateway-- we haven't planted one there yet.
So as a result of my *lack of vision,* we're going to have to take a more scenic route.
Scott? These are high-density translocators...
...hardwired into the core.
Yes, dear, ***they are.*** Pretty exciting stuff.
And after plugging in the right coordinates, and a short jump away...
Here we are.
If I'm right, what you showed me should be...
Well, take a look.
Okay. Wow. There it is.
So, *uh...**what is** it?*

Otherworld.
RRARRRRRR!
Saturnyne! The mutant is going to pull us from the sky.
Hmmm.
Perhaps.
KRRKKK
Or perhaps things are simply moving--*aligning*--to their rightful position. Universes, realms, planets...and players.
All is as was foretold. For I have seen the signs--*I have watched them come to pass.*
And now...
FWOOM
It's time to show all who might wonder exactly who rules this land--*forever constant and without question.*

ZZRNNNNN
The real question is...
SNAP!
...what am I going to do with you?
Uh-- unfreeze...
...me.
No. I don't think I will. *Not yet.*

So...
Not my area of expertise...but it looks like some kind of energy core?
Close. Everything here is powered by a remote singularity drive. That energy flow is accessed by a stable trans-space bridge, which--*apparently*--is offline since everything here looks like it's running on backup.
If I'm remembering correctly, this is the igniter that reopens that bridge...enabling everything to power back up.
The problem is you need a pretty significant independent power source to get this thing started, and I honestly don't know where we'd find--
Hey, Dad.
Yeah?
I think I have an idea.
Clever boy.

So...first things first...
I would like to hear what insanity made you think you could march an army into my lands and hope for any outcome that did not end in tears?
You think we answer to you, witch?
In this place...*all* answer to me.
See?
...
Now...by what right are you here?
By right of the Twilight Sword and our liege who wields it.
But if you think this... magic--*or even my destruction*--is enough to deter us...*you are wrong.*
We will have the other half of the land.
We will have Krakoa. And the way there is through here.
If we have to break a million bodies against the walls of your citadel....we will. You have my word.

Forgive me, Majestrix, but I cannot help but notice...
This one is saying--*I believe he is saying*--they are willing to pay a blood price for what they want.
Dryador has fallen. These... creatures were its conquerors.
There is... *precedent.*
Yes...
That's true.
So, *acting regent of Dryador.* Are you exercising your rights as a vassal state of the Starlight Citadel? Are you willing to fight for it in a manner we see fit?
We will meet you in any arena you choose.
Yes. We will fight.
I witness these words. *It is DONE.*
Once again, I have seen the signs--*I have watched them come to pass.*
In three days' time, I will summon your champions of Arakko here to duel the champions of Otherworld.

Agreed.
Send your best. Send your worst. It will not matter.
I think it might. Even the most simple of creatures is capable of great things when fighting for a cause.
But, great Saturnyne, who are these simple beings that would fight for Otherworld? Shall we call out to Avalon? To Blightspoke or the Hothive?
Who will fight for the Starlight Citadel? Who would fight--*and die*--to stop the Arakko horde from traveling from here to Krakoa?
Now, child... you may ***speak.***
@%#&@ you.
Hmmmm.
What about *you,* Krakoan? What say you?
We don't really have much of a choice, do we?
Things proceed as predicted. All of this was... preordained.

Then...
Yeah. We'll *fight.*
I witness these words. *It is DONE.*
Once again, I have seen the signs-- I have watched them come to pass.
See the card that was drawn. See what shape the future holds.
See it now.
The Twilight Blade. Mercy. Vermilion. The Red Sword of War. Colony. The Black Bone of Amduat. Seducer. Pogg Ur-Pogg. Purity. Alluvium. Muramasa.
Muramasa. The Sword of Might. The Starlight Sword. Grasscutter. Godkiller. Warlock. The Soul Sword. The Scarab. The Light of Galador. Skybreaker.

These...
The Ten of Swords.
Slow and steady, son.
And be careful.
Oouffff!
CORE ACCESSED. ESTABLISHING BRIDGE.
"Three days."
In three days, we will gather your champions here. Then we will see what you are made of.
Lives will be lost, alliances will be shattered and fortunes will be gained.
Know this!

Yeah. Here's what *I* want to know...
What game are you playing, Saturnyne?
The oldest one there is.
So we, what, pick our champions, find the blades...and then what happens?
Then the contest begins.
Care to be more specific?
It's exactly what you think, mutant.
You step into the arena, knowing the full measure of what you're fighting for...
You face your enemy, who wants nothing less than your total annihilation...you look them in the eye, steady yourself...
BRIDGE STABLE. STATION COMING ONLINE.
And then...
And then...

"You raise.
"Your.
"SWORD."

S.W.O.R.D.

[BRAND]..............[0000]
[.....]..............[NULL]

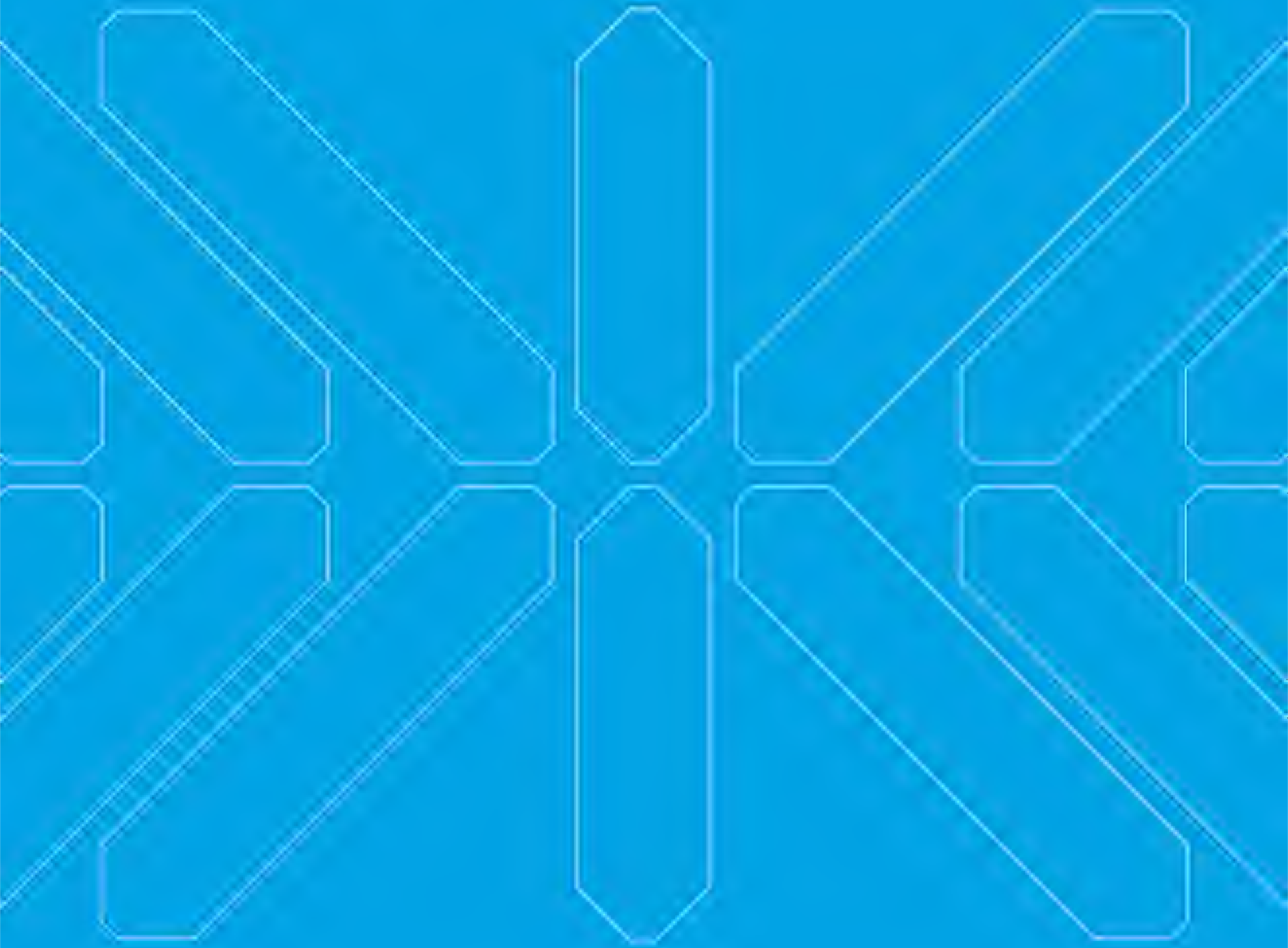
S.W.O.R.D. ORBITAL STATION [THE PEAK] ACTION REPORT

```
STATUS:..................................................OFFLINE
SECURITY MEASURES:......................................DISABLED
ENGINES:.................................................OFFLINE
EMERGENCY POWER:.........................................FAILING
CREW SIZE:.................................................6,290
BIOLOGICAL SCANS:.......................LIFE-FORMS UNDETECTED
```

NOTE: Three weeks ago, all contact with the Peak ceased, and the power and defense grid went offline. Efforts to contact the station have failed. All rescue missions have failed. Quarantine measures have been enacted.

No one knows what happened.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

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[00_Unite________]

X-FACTOR #4

[XOS]	[X-FAC4]

WILLIAMS
GÓMEZ
SILVA

PART 02 OF 22

CHAPTER

02

Krakoa.
Just a bit farther 'til the Healing Gardens! We can make it!
≠Cough!≠ I can make it on my own...
Hnn-- Maybe not...
Rictor!
INHALE

Careful, he's--
Yes.
I can see.
Where is...
-Kaff-
God--just hang on, Julio! Help is on the way...
Why %$#@& bother...
...Rictor...?

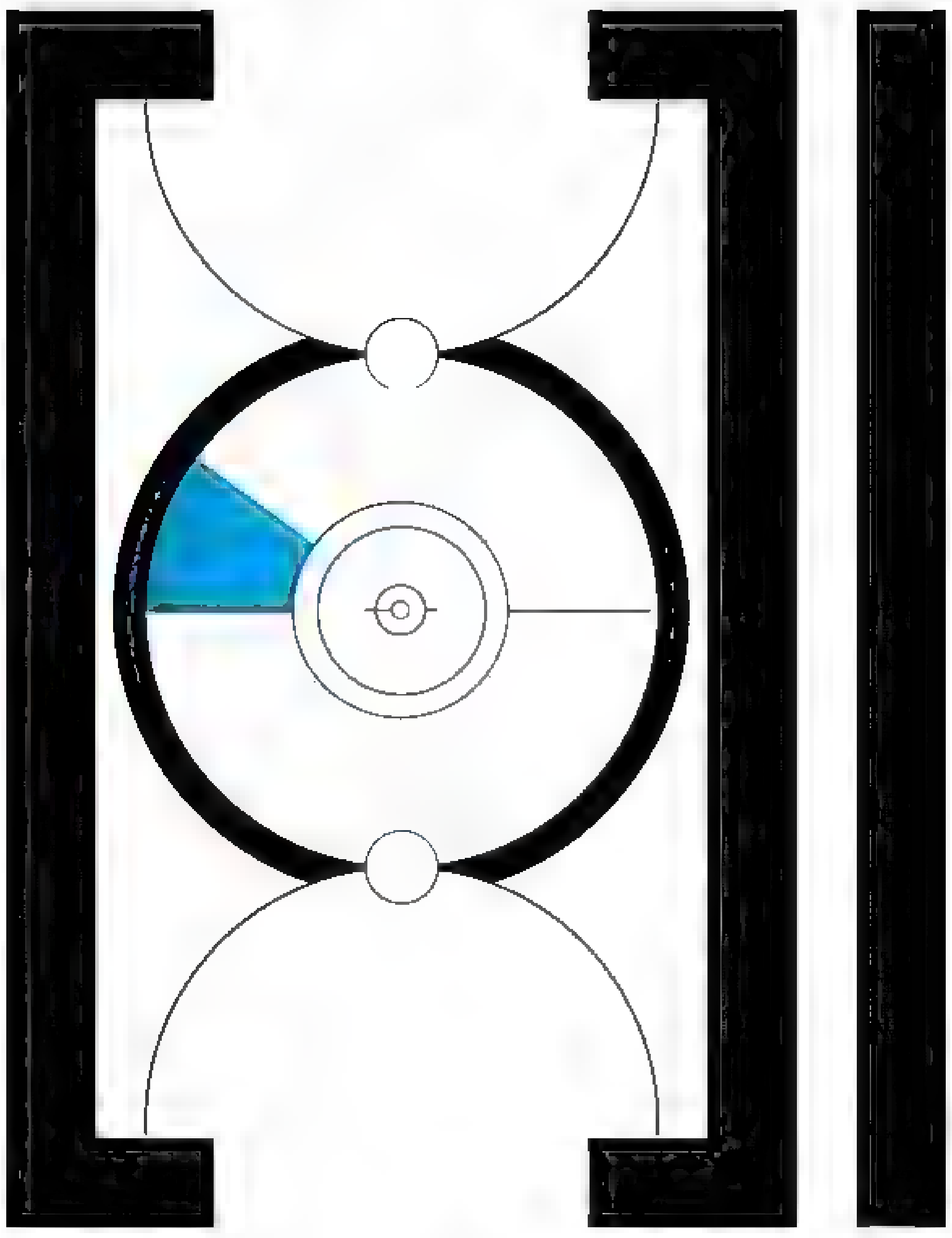
⊰Kaff⊱
Rictor... can you hear me?
Uhn...
I...I hear you...
Unh...
Then *fight* this poison, damn you... a mutant *fights!*
What the hell *happened* over there? Rachel, get these two back to the Healing Gardens.
Yes, Dr. Reyes.
⊰Kaff⊱
I did not *ask* for this connection to you...
You *foolish*... boy...

Dr. Reyes-- wait.
...We've got one more for you. Stretcher courtesy of Saturnyne.
I better go download everything to X-Force.
Good call. I'll let Cyke know what's coming.
I am always furious with myself, but the times my self-hatred reaches its zenith are the days in which I am a desperate wispy thing, feverishly seeking validation from everyone around me.
Is that Rockslide?!
Is he--
Dead.
Today is one of those days.
He'll be coming with me too, then.

Otherworld.
Hmph.
Of course I blame myself for Rockslide's death. I so easily could have **prevented** it...
Stop wallowing and go find the rabbit hole, little bunny.
Both Arakko and Krakoa have their oracles in play. Now all we must do is wait for them to figure it out.
If the oracles succeed, of course.
But in the meantime, let us ensure there will be no further trespasses upon Otherworld.
SWOOSH
K-CHIRRRRRRRRR!
There. The so-called External Gate will remain shut until further notice.

CHIRRRR--RRRRRR--RRRR
Krakoa.
AH!
Polaris!
AHHHHHH--!
KRRRAAAAOOOARRRRRRR
Earthquake!
Sucks to be terrestrial.
Okay, okay-- we get it, Krakoa! I know you wanted the External Gate to stay open, but there's no need to throw a fit!
No one here chose to close it-- Saturnyne did!
We don't have any say in what Otherworld does!

The provinces of Otherworld exist on a great wheel. Over time, as the favor of each Kingdom does rise and fall, all serve the center where sits the Starlight Citadel and Her Whyness, the Omniversal Majestrix Opal Luna Saturnyne. The lands are split into two halves -- fair kingdoms and foul kingdoms -- and while treaty and conflict ensure a state of uneasy peace and reliable conflict between the nations, Saturnyne stands above them, watching over the entire land where all realities meet.



THE FLOATING KINGDOM OF ROMA REGINA

REGENT: **LADY ROMA**

The hedonistic queendom of Lady Roma. After the split with her father **Merlin**, she established a kingdom of free love and lawlessness in opposition to her father's strict and repressive rule. While most expected the kingdom to fall into violence and ruin without laws, the gentle yet chaotic nature of the fae allowed them to thrive under anarchy, and Roma Regina remains a paradise for many.

A candyland, a neon playroom, a lusty pleasure zone. A source of many interesting and vitally important magical herbs, the Romana are master herbalists and gardeners. However, like most hedonists, they enjoy the unpredictable, and travelers often find themselves dancing into exhaustion or gazing too deeply into the abyss.

It is for this reason that the Floating Kingdom is not open to any passer-by. The doorway inside is guarded and locked, and quite upside-down. Any attempt to sneak in would find a traveler without anywhere to stand. It is said that at the heart of the kingdom stands a single supermassive obelisk that -- at night -- shines like the sun, and during the day is as black as night. If you stare long enough, you can see the stars and constellations of some other heaven that is not of this realm.

Roma rules less as a governing body and more as simply the favored of her people. They adore her and trust her to protect them from the advances of their rival kingdom and her father, Merlin.

Later.
Rachel, you're not going to find your way past anything *I* couldn't.
Well, I can try.
%‡#@!
Ah, ah, ah! Only the *rabbit* may look.
See? I told you.
FWOOOOOOO
Oh no.
The Healing Gardens.
ARGH!
I *told* you there's no getting past the witch! You just triggered the same psychic trap that *I* tried getting past over and over again.
Ow...
Suck it up. That wasn't even the real Saturnyne--just a psychic firewall she set up. It loops the same sequence no matter who tries accessing the sword prophecy through Polaris' subconscious.
Well, we still have to figure out what swords we're allowed to bring and who's supposed to be wielding them, *somehow*. Who the hell's the *"rabbit"?*
Do...do you guys think it's *me?*
No, that can't be right. How am *I* supposed to figure out a mystical prophecy on my *own?!*
I'm not psychic *or* a sorceress...

hhhhhhn--
aa...hhhhhhn--
aa...
Dying...
Dying...
sucks...
hhhhhhn--
aa...
Healer...
go help...the
boy...
I must
help you
both.
He is
dying.
'Mn...
nn...
'M no'
scared...
You...you're
letting him
pass on?

He will be resurrected. Swiftly.
Then join him.
⊰Gasp⊱
Urk--
Now... I allow *you* to pass on...
⊰WHEEZE!⊱
Hnn!
STOP!

Out of my *head*, telepath!
NO.
I had to stop you from killing Healer.
ARRRRGH!
Hnn--were I not already hobbled by these poisoned blades of the Horsemen, you would *never* be able to reach inside my mind!
Maybe not.
But here I am.
Get... out...
I gotta say...you've made a very interesting choice in the visual presentation of my voice in your head.
OUT!
RARRRGH! LEAVE ME!
Rachel, what did you do?!
I--I don't know! He just kicked me out of his head!
He was *stabilized!*
Stabilized and trying to *murder* Healer!

HOLY REPUBLIC OF FAE

REGENT: **GREAT HIEROPHANT MERLIN**

The kingdom of the wizard Merlin. His desire for law and order has leeched the life from the once-lush and wild land of the fae.

Once, Merlin and his daughter Roma ruled harmoniously over two courts of Fae that were one, like a binary star: he in charge during the year's light or Seelie half, and she ruling over the dark or Unseelie half. The destruction of the Captain Britain Corps sent Otherworld into chaos, and in the fray the father and daughter turned against one another as each took their court and half of the kingdom for themselves.

Merlin became a strict Hierophant to his Seelie kingdom in an attempt to steer them from hedonism and into magical order. Their faerie nature rebelled, and Merlin fought back against his own people with stricter and more autocratic means, making factory workers from troubadours and soldiers from hunters, channeling massive amounts of fae magic into copper and glass machines. Now the Holy Republic of Fae is a land of cogs and black smoke, iron towers and smog-choked cities.

Without his daughter to temper his ways, Merlin rules the Holy Republic of Fae with an enchanted iron fist. Merlin does not travel without a retinue of fiercely armed and armored elven soldiers who are most loyal to their High Priest.

The Arbor Magna Hatchery.
Hope, will you please finish up here? I sense... a visitor.
What is it, child? Your mind sounds like a siren.
I could have stopped that sword with a single thought.
I may as well have killed Rockslide with my bare hands.
When Santo is resurrected, I will apologize to him.
What is the resurrection queue protocols for casualties of war?

There's been no precedent to establish such protocols yet.
Why do ye ask?
Show them.
Dear God... it was all a trap...
⸗Gasp!⸗
Precedent, indeed...
Yes...of course. We'll begin the creation of new Rictor and Rockslide husks immediately and have them resurrected within the hour.

Wait--is that wise? We've never worked that fast before!
I am aware, and I understand that such an abbreviated schedule appears daunting.
But I am requesting that you *please try.*
We simply must adapt in times of war.
All right, Professor.
We'll... we'll do our best.
I...I don't know...
Don't be nervous-- we can do this.
Because *this* is what we *do.*

Hope-- you were right! We did it!
Nnn...
Ah!
There you are.
You look well, Rictor.
I look naked.
How'd I die? I only remember... %$#@, how long was I even out?
Polaris witnessed your demise--Hope will use this to help supply the time following your last Cerebro backup.
There is... quite a lot for you to catch up on, I'm afraid.

Hello, Rockslide.
Time for you to come back to us too, dear boy.
AA-- AAHH--!
What's wrong Professor...
Hope!

Cradle Three.
House of M.
Cradle Two.
The Summer House.
KRRZZZT!
Cradle One.
The Pointe.
Cradle Four.
Moira's No-Place.

Professor!
No, no, no, no--oh god--something's--
Something's happening to Rockslide!
Just--just hold on! It'll be okay! Everything will be okay!
But I feel fine...
Ugh...
Wh-why are...
I can't-- I can't feel--
I canna feel--
Our connection is offline!
How?! What's happening?

He's not waking up! I can't *heal* him-- something's wrong!
I'm *sorry*-- I'm *sorry*-- I'm *sorry*--
Rockslide... I am *so* sorry...
This is our fault! *We* did this! *We #$%&@$ up!*
But *how?* The eggs took the correct genetic seed, so it couldn't have been Proteus... and the husks were aged perfectly... which means...
That it was me? *I* did this?! Oh, *god*--
Th-then we have to destroy the *eggs!* The whole *batch* could be tainted!
Josh... can you...
Y-yes.

-pant-
-pant-
You...
...you're not Rockslide.
I'm sorry, Josh...
It's--it's *fine*--
We have to do this...

Xavier's waking up!
Nn...
⸗Gasp!⸗
We--
--are--
--back--
--online.
W-what... what has...
Oh, dear lord, no...
No! The eggs--no, this simply can't be!
Why have all the eggs been destroyed?!
What have you done?!
...That is not Rockslide.

Santo?
Who's Santo?
This both is...and is *not* Rockslide.
Wh-what?
It *is* Rockslide, but that is not *our* Santo.
How is that possible?
That is what we have yet to discover.
Now, *Rictor*...my boy...
I need to verify it's you.

Huh?
What if it's not him? What if it *is* him and he's still messed up too?
Does he no' look well enough?
How can we know?
Hope, what do we do?
I don't know! I--I'm not ready to have the "*how do we get rid of failed resurrections*" conversation!
Whoa, whoa--**hey!**
You **guys,** I'm fine! I swear!
How can we be sure you aren't corrupted either?
Mate... What if this is some Otherworld psyop tactic to get their agents behind enemy lines?!
Do you guys even hear yourselves!? This is ***ridiculous!***
Is it?! We just resurrected a complete ***stranger!***
ENOUGH!
Please... let me assure you--this is most certainly ***our*** Rictor.
⸗Gasp!⸗
Then...***where*** exactly did Rictor die?
Because I--I think I may have figured out what happened to Rockslide.

CONFIDENTIAL

AFTER-ACTION REPORT FOLLOWING NONSTANDARD RESURRECTION

[redacted]

Resurrection Report: **ROCKSLIDE** (A.K.A. “Santo Vaccaro”)
Location of Death: “Otherworld”
Time of Death: 16:34 KMT
Manner of Death: Bisected, instantaneous

Reason for Report: Following an otherwise standard resurrection, Rockslide seems to be having difficulty maintaining physical form. Immediate response found that after an initial sloughing of matter, Rockslide seems to be conscious and otherwise unharmed.

Medical backup has been dispatched to monitor his vital signs, which seem to be otherwise normal, and telepaths are seeing to his mental condition.

Triage and troubleshooting of the resurrection cradle and procedures quickly cleared steps 1-4 of the process from error, leading to a conclusion that the physical matter of the created egg to be the probable source. As such, **all existing egg backup material has been destroyed.**

An outage of Cerebro helmets was reported during resurrection and will be investigated further.

Due to the potential for Otherworld breach and corruption of resurrection materials. **ALL RESURRECTION PROTOCOLS ARE HEREBY SUSPENDED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE.**

ACTION: RUN DIAGNOSTICS ON ALL CEREBRO BACKUPS FOLLOWING OUTAGE

Further reports to come following monitoring and exams.

The undersigned bear witness to
the after action report:

Hope

REPRESENTATIVE, THE FIVE

REPRESENTATIVE, _X-FACTOR
INVESTIGATIONS_ [ORGANIZATION]

Rictor died in Krakoa. His exact moment of death happened in the Healing Gardens.
The Grove. Krakoa.
But *Rockslide*-- *he* died on Otherworld soil.
The Five can confirm that dying in Otherworld somehow corrupts a mutant's Cerebro backup.
You mean to say that Santo perished out of *range?*
Aye. The failure of the resurrection was no' our fault, but...
It's no one's fault but my own. I should have realized much sooner there could be potential limitations from which Cerebro can pull backups from Otherworld.
So who is this?
Sigh This is... a roll of the dice.

For resurrection purposes--Otherworld is less like a *place* and more like... a convergence of possibilities.
What we *do* know is that dying there forfeits your identity, memories, experiences, physicality--everything from this reality will be lost upon resurrection.
The outcome is a gamble, but the absolute is that you *will* be rewritten.
Every previous backup will be erased and replaced with this new amalgamation.
Thus removing the possibility of a true resurrection ever again.
That explains the Cerebro backups briefly shorting out.
Yes--it was the corrupted backup overwriting everything Rockslide was to us. It had a strange effect on the Five as well.
Well...resurrecting from an Otherworld death... it creates a brand-new composite drawn out of the nearly infinite possibilities of all of the things you ever could have potentially become.
Yeah. So it's someone who is *you*, but also someone who is...
New.
Then we have lost Rockslide. Forever.
And it is through his terrible sacrifice we gain a bleak understanding of our *catastrophic* failures.]

That is still *death.* This is a *permanent* death we're discussing. Creating a new person does not overturn the loss of one of our people.
Your apathy sickens me, Charles. Santo was one of our *young!*
How can you all behave so cavalierly?! He's dead! Rockslide is *dead!*
Ms. Frost, please remain calm--
No! We must call off this reckless "tournament" at once--we'd be barbaric to willfully risk the lives of even more Krakoans!
And what of the bargain struck to defend Krakoa from a horde of bloodlusting Arakkii? You forget our Champions will likely *choose* to participate in the tournament as it is in service of our imminent *war.*
Yes--and what *of* those Champions, daughter? Who are they? Have you deciphered the clues Saturnyne gave you yet?
Uh-- well, not--
You *dare* dally? We need to know this information if we are to *survive!*
Just do the WORK, Polaris!
Erik.
As above, so below.
Child... are you all right?
From one womb came two-- a hero destined to brandish what the earth hath swallowed, and an echo doomed to yearn for what the stars hath forsworn.
Lost soul, an edge gained. A lone wanderer returns to a forge left ablaze.

Sword in the stone, stationed in space. A young man, born old, pilots a place.
A father forsaken, a husband betrayed. An ancient treasure sharpens the death his children crave.
The prophecies!
Friend-self, friends lost. Out of one comes many, into many comes one.
Eight years, gone in seconds. From a childhood lost comes a woman grown. Her only friends were weapons; now her soul a blade hers alone.
Once goddess, once queen, one sword with which to split the sky in twain. Vibranium inlaid, a tempest contained, she is the wrath of heavens wielding a legacy.
Ego death... and broken stone... two wars waged by one champion alone...
Nn... what...? Where--
You're all right, daughter. Do you see how easy that was? If you had listened to me *sooner*--
No, where's *Rockslide?!* I had him... I *held* him--
No!
Lorna!
No-- let her go. She needs to grieve. And we've a visit to arrange.

CONFIDENTIAL AMENDMENT

TO AFTER-ACTION REPORT FOLLOWING A NONSTANDARD RESURRECTION PRECEDING COUNCIL INVOLVEMENT

[redacted]

Following a full mental and psychic battery of exams, Rockslide seems to be...**changed** but otherwise unharmed. X-Factor has verified his physical identity as that of Rockslide. The Santo who has been returned to us claims to feel fine despite his obvious physical discomfort.

Cerebro backups seem otherwise unharmed and ready when we resume normal resurrection protocol. Follow-up research seems to suggest that the resurrection “egg” material can also be cleared of corruption or damage. As such, we have begun regrowing and will be able to resume resurrections when they are replenished.

Early conclusions suppose that it is the **location** of Rockslide’s physical demise within Otherworld that led to his change and the confusion as to whether this Rockslide is the same as the one who died. Theories regarding the multi-dimensional nature of Otherworld suppose that a death within Otherworld leads to an uncertainty in the Resurrection process.

Consider: If Otherworld is the nexus of all realities, then the Rockslide returned to us from death in such a place may be touched by those realities.

It is possible, then, that the Rockslide who has returned to us is parts of all of Rockslides from across the various universes. It is also possible that this is not our Rockslide at all, and may be dangerous, but we assert **no evidence** of this so far. However, potential security protocols in such a situation have been covertly shared with X-Force.

The undersigned bear witness to
the after action report:

Hope

REPRESENTATIVE, THE FIVE

REPRESENTATIVE, _X-FACTOR
INVESTIGATIONS_ [ORGANIZATION]

The Healing Gardens.
Resurrection services are offline until further notice. The entire crop of standby eggs has been destroyed, and it will take another few days to restore them all.
So I must warn you that there will be a delay in your resurrection should you succumb to your wounds, Apocalypse.
One specific shout aimed at me is all it took to shake loose the damned prophecies?
What a fitting humiliation.
Your great experiment has ended. You *failed.*
I often find a terrifying comfort in the possibility of evanescing. I never asked to exist.
Or to be like this.
You chose not to heed the Council and now your hubris has doomed us all.
This *clumsy* and *fumbling* congregation of flaws.

Huff
I think there's something wrong with me.
I can still feel an itch in my head, like Saturnyne's not quite done with me yet...
A minor justice that you also suffer consequences of your poor decisions.
Huff
Sometimes I'm able to convince myself that there's no such thing as kindness in this world. No such thing as courage.
I doubt anyone shall grieve *your* absence.
I tell myself there's only redemption and penitence. There is only reticence and pain.
Huff
Huff
Done.
I am--thankfully--often wrong on such things.

!! WARNING !!

FOR IMMEDIATE DISSEMINATION AND ACTION TO ALL CITIZENS OF KRAKOA

Effective IMMEDIATELY:
The Council has declared a ban on all unauthorized travel to and from the following gates:

- **External Gate**
- **Avalon Gate**
- Any previously unnamed gate leading to **Otherworld**

If you find yourself within Otherworld *for any reason*, please operate with **extreme caution**. Resurrection protocols cannot be guaranteed following fatal injury in Otherworld. While in Otherworld, *proceed with utmost caution*. Prioritize return to Krakoa through the nearest gate.

Do not travel to Otherworld without express Council permission. Violation can result in final death.

-- THE COUNCIL

The Arbor Magna Hatchery.
Where's... Where'd the rest of Rockslide's remains go?
I am so desperate to make my father proud. I am also, unfortunately, often desperate to thoroughly dematerialize.
Voltus Glade.
This is the *real* clue that Saturnyne left me. It's the tournament key. A...casting circle.
As Champions retrieve their swords, they return here to a position within the circle. When each of these symbols is touching its corresponding sword at the same time, then this opens our tournament portal.
These desires war, so I have to satisfy both. Be soft and unyielding, strong and vulnerable, open and shut; all at once.
Fearless and still afraid of everything.
And, Champions, be warned--to die in Otherworld will be a *true* death.
Saturnyne wrote the instructions for me using the Earth's geomagnetic spectrum. Of *course* telepaths wouldn't have been able to see it in my head--I'm the only one who *can*.
Building this...required sacrifice.
I mean that her instructions called for *literal, ritual* sacrifice. And last night...I held Rockslide as he fell into pieces in my bare hands.
These stones you see here...
I used Rockslide's remains to construct Saturnyne's casting circle. From this day forward, it will remain here as a permanent memorial to Rockslide--the *Sanctus Sacrum.* Sacred Sacrifice.
When the portal opens, we march to *slaughter* this scourge who brought the unwelcome conflict to our doorstep that killed our little brother.
We failed Santo. To *honor* his sacrifice, we must make this death *count.*

Well, damn.
Let's get ready to show these Arakkii our finest Krakoan diplomacy.
CHRT
Pound the war drums.

Okay. Thankfully we know a lot of psychics because I didn't write down what Polaris said when she was saying it but we were able to go back and get it. Here's what I was able to figure out, but some of this stuff seems kind of personal - like maybe you guys will need to weigh in. I guessed the people for many of them but I'm not 100% sure on the swords.

Also, I asked Krakoa and he's just as confused as we are.

-- Doug

Eight years, gone in seconds. From childhood lost,
comes a creature grown. A young girl's friends used as
weapons honed a woman's soul into a blade of her own.

'Yana seemed to snatch this one up pretty quick -- I guessed she would 'cause she made a really pissed-off face when she heard it.

A beacon slices darkness, stationed in space.
A young man, born old, pilots a place.

Space, young man born old. I say we ask Cable what he thinks?

Friend-self, friends lost. Out of one comes many,
into many comes one.

I only know one guy who talks like that. And if he has to go into this, I'm going with him.

Then again, Warlock can turn into a sword and I can't. So maybe he's coming with me. Don't know what the second part's about though...

Once goddess, once queen, one sword with which to split
the sky in twain. Vibranium inlaid, a tempest contained,
the wrath of heavens comes wielding a legacy.

This has got to be Storm, right? It's kinda pretty. Someone should cross-stitch it for her house. I wish mine was like this.

Lost soul, an edge gained.
A lone wanderer returns to a forge left ablaze.

I'll be honest, this stumped me a little, but Logan seems to be sure that the Muramasa blade is going to factor in here, and he's taking care of it. (Lone Wanderer, yeah, that's him.)

As above, so below.
From one womb came two -- a hero destined to brandish
what the earth hath swallowed, and an echo doomed to
yearn for what the stars hath forsworn.

I'm not sure I got anything special about this one, but this seems like the Braddock twins, right? But Brian's not a mutant. I'm also not sure which one is which in this?

Ego death and broken stone;
two wars waged by one champion alone.

Gorgon showed up pretty quickly when he heard we were talking swords and he's positive this one is for him. Someone else can talk him out of it if they want.

A father forsaken, a husband betrayed.
An ancient treasure sharpens the death his children crave.

This is another one that got claimed pretty quickly by someone I'm not going to fight with. • **• says he's known from the beginning he's going in, and he's gone to collect his sword.**

WOLVERINE

WOLVERINE #6

[XOS] [W6]

PERCY
BOGDANOVIC
WILSON

PART 03 OF 22

CHAPTER
03

For most of us...
..."been to Hell and back" is just an expression.
I know from firsthand experience, this place is the best there is at punishment...
...by mining the pain already inside you, by accounting for what you owe.
Hell is where the past catches up with you.
And I'm here because the past has caught up to...

...Krakoa.
Now we're all due for a reckoning.
You're the only one whose voice really matters.
Even when the kings and queens of the Quiet Council are blowing hot air for hours on end.

Isn't that right, bub?
You *wanted* the External Gate open. That means you wanted war.
This place was supposed to be a fresh start for all of us...
...yet here you are, dragging us back in time.
This ain't the first fight I went into blind.
But losing's never been my policy.
Especially now. Because I think we got something here worth fighting for.
I really do.
So I'm gonna find the Muramasa blade. And I'm gonna make some #%@& bleed. And I'm gonna win.
But I don't think I'm ever gonna trust your green ass.

When Polaris started spitting her riddles, seemed obvious which one referred to me.
A soul lost, an edge gained.
I got three days to secure the Muramasa blade...
...so that I can take my place in the tournament of swords and settle what amounts to a multidimensional feud over land rights.
It dredges up some of my best and worst memories.
I lost my wife, Itsu. I thought I lost my son, Daken.
And I channeled that loss and rage into steel.
Muramasa--the greatest swordsmith the world's ever known--forged me a blade so that I could kill 'em all.
He put me through the refiner's fire by taking my shattered soul and hammering it into the metal itself.
I wielded it like an angry god.

The Quarry. Krakoa.
But that part of me's gone to history...
Just like the blade itself, which was destroyed...
...and Muramasa, who's gone missing.
Why you so busy fighting nothing?
I am not fighting nothing. I am fighting the future.
If I anticipate every slash and feint and thrust today, I will not be surprised by tomorrow.
Does that mean you're not surprised by me coming here?
I am not surprised by you.
You want to know how to find Muramasa.
And you don't want to tell me, because you're pissed.
Because if there's a dimension shaker of a sword fight, Silver Samurai should be the one to get the call.
So I guess I'm gonna have to earn your help...

...BY BEATING IT OUT OF YOU!
SNIKT
SNIKT

You have no respect or discipline.
It should have been me!
CHING
Maybe you're right.
But it wasn't.
And there's no reshuffling the deck.
Tell me!
SHUNK
I only know rumors...

Arakko.
The Tower of Broken Will.
The first watchtower to fall in the second great war.
How long has he been in the pit?
One hundred years and a season.
Not long enough.

To break *him?* No... not long enough.
If it were my choice, there he'd remain until the oceans dried up and the stars burned out, but here we are... humbled.
He will not be humbled.
Then *we* will humble him.
He isn't going to help us.
I will make him beg for our help.
The pit was beyond mercy for him, and he will not escape it lightly.
The slayer of my husband does not deserve freedom, unless it finally brings him the death he deserves.
But we are fooling ourselves if we think we're here for a warrior. There will be no warrior in the pit.
Time will have broken him. Starvation will have thinned him. Boredom will have feebled him.
Ah, old friends!

I assume you've come seeking favor?
You've been in a hole for a hundred years...
You should be the one seeking our favor.
And yet I am not. There is one beauty who sings me songs. There is another who brings me bread.
Some bring me books. Others, wine. Or gold and pretty things. I do not mind such companionship. It pleases me.
You see, I'm quite comfortable here. I want for nothing.
What do you want, War?

You were sentenced here to suffer!
The citizens of Arakko wouldn't allow it, I'm afraid. You know how they love me so.
You killed my husband--robbed me of my love and my child of his father.
It's not my fault he demanded to fight me. For his so-called honor.
Tell me. Was I supposed to lose to my inferior just to please you?
I may be a tenderhearted poet, but I'm also a killing machine.
Do you remember what I told you, War? When you put me in this hole?
I said that you would come back here one day and *beg* for my help. Arakko needs her champion.
So I ask again--are you here for a favor?
Because it won't be easy to convince me to leave this cozy little vacation.
We bring an offering of death.
The time of reckoning is upon us. We are at war with Krakoa.
The witch of Otherworld has drawn her cards and chosen her ten swords.
She named you, Solem.

Ah, excellent! I assume I'll fight their greatest warrior, then? Nothing less will do.
We know nothing of the rules or our opponents...but I hope it is so.
And though I will accept nothing but our triumph, I pray for your loss.
You will need a sword.
Oh, I already have a dagger.
War gave it to me a century ago. I hope it's not rusty. What was it you said?
Oh, yes. "I offer you this gift, so that you might kill yourself in despair with the blade of the man you killed."
Here it is. Sorry I didn't off myself with it.
But it's a Hellblade, and I didn't want to damn myself.
Hell is so uncomfortable, after all.
Also...that despair you mentioned?
Never felt a drop of it.

No. The cards require a sword.
A blade called Muramasa.
What's a Muramasa? And where do I find it?
We have...no idea.
How long do I have?
Three days.
Well? Do you accept this noble calling, *champion?* Or will you wallow forever in your selfish comfort?
Oh, I accept.
KRINCH
This sounds like a most delicious assignment.
See you in the arena.

FROM

THE ANNALS OF ARAKKO: THE TRIAL OF SOLEM

He could make a mountain fall in love with him, some said. He could whisper down a cloud and invite its rain to bathe him before it blew off. Flowers opened where he stepped, and the oceans surrounding Arakko turned up pretty stones and shells and pearls for him to delight in.

Man and woman alike both craved him and wished to tear him apart in the same impulse. This craving he indulged to excess. But any who might try to hurt him he hurt back many times over.

Some called him a devil, but the devil deals in evil.

Solem's self-professed agenda is pleasure and gamesmanship. He has loyalty to none but himself. He can be found where there is music and flesh and wine -- and, sometimes, blood.

Some said he was long past a reckoning. Justice was due. This was but one incident counted on a million hands.

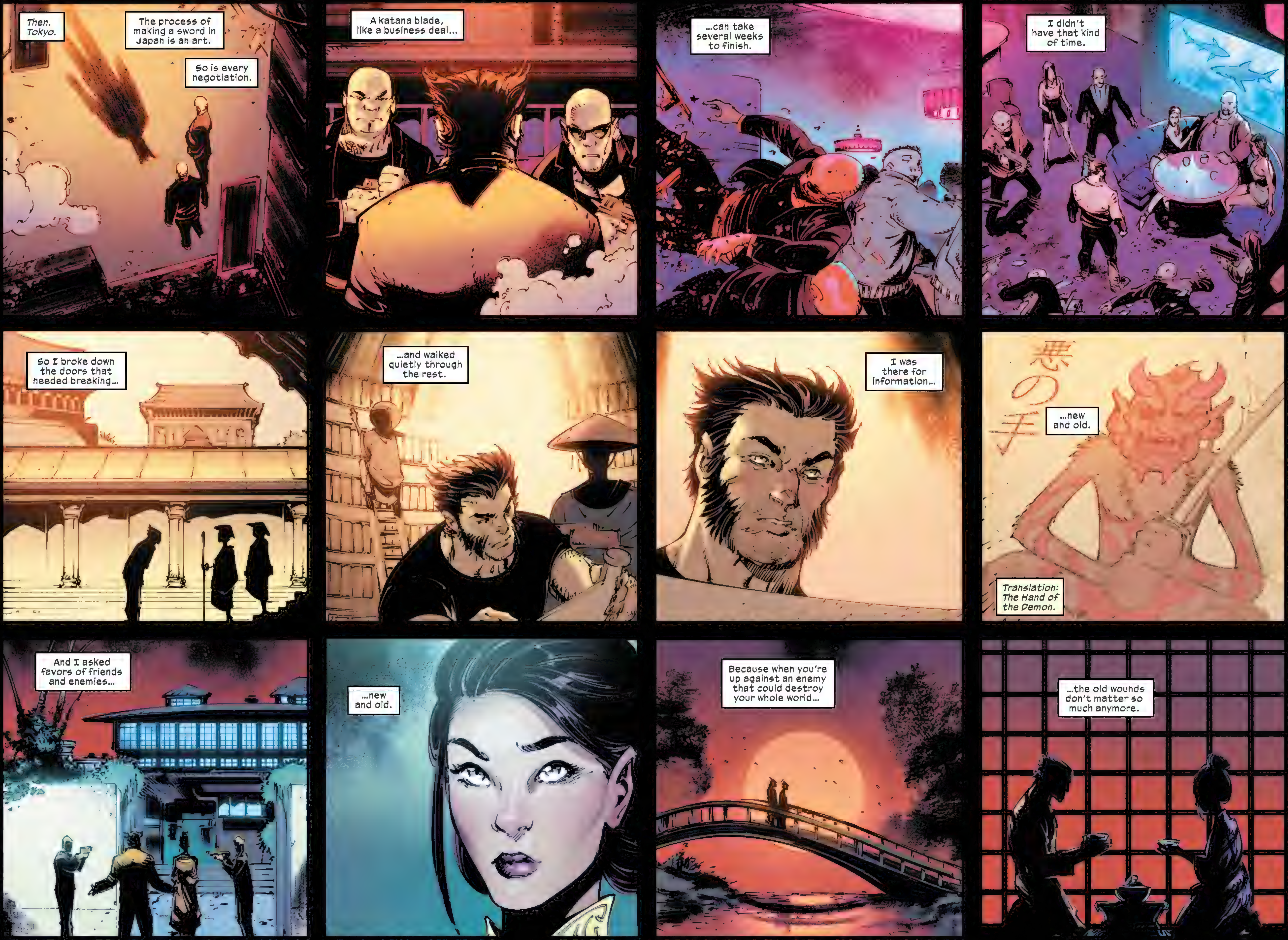
The death of Bracken, the husband of War, the father of Summoner.

The details of their relationship are unknown. Some say the two were intimate, and when Solem grew bored and ended the affair, Bracken would not allow it, out of pride or rage. It is supposed by others that Solem killed Bracken merely to upset War, who has long refused his advances.

And still others believe that Solem wanted the gate to Krakoa opened, that he was bored with Arakko and wished for a new playground. The murder of Bracken was meant to fill War with dissatisfaction and fury that might bring about the great conflict he hungered for as it would allow his escape.

The [redacted] had all been wronged by Solem in some manner. Their hearts broken, their purses emptied, their loved ones slain. For his crime he was banished to a pit to remain in solitude until the end of time.

Upon his sentencing, when asked if he had any final words, he merely smiled and said, “Oh, this is hardly the last you'll hear from me.”


Then. Tokyo.
The process of making a sword in Japan is an art.
So is every negotiation.
A katana blade, like a business deal...
...can take several weeks to finish.
I didn't have that kind of time.
So I broke down the doors that needed breaking...
...and walked quietly through the rest.
I was there for information...
悪の手
...new and old.
Translation: The Hand of the Demon.
And I asked favors of friends and enemies...
...new and old.
Because when you're up against an enemy that could destroy your whole world...
...the old wounds don't matter so much anymore.

The future trumps history.
And the future of mutantkind depends on me tracking down Muramasa.
From what I learned...
...the mutants weren't the only ones in trouble.
Something dark had come for Muramasa.

Something that had been buried a long time.

WHISPERS OF MURAMASA

Location: *Dragon Claw Lounge. Shinjuku.*

Kiyoshi Sato (Yakuza Crime Lord): "You show no respect but demand it? You say nothing but expect me to speak? You break the bones of my men and scare my club empty and drain my bottle of sake without apology? You are unwashed and your smell displeases me. I offer you information only to rid myself of you. Yes, I employed Muramasa for a brief period -- two years ago now. He might be a swordsmith, but his art extends to other weaponry. He crafted bullets for me. Bullets that could pierce any stone or metal or armor. Bullets that could change direction mid-air. Bullets that ripped the soul right out of a body. When I requested his services again, several months ago, we found his home empty and full of flies. The walls were scored with sword slashes. There was a mark on his front door. A Japanese character etched in dried blood. It read, 'Beast.' Wherever he has gone, it is a place not worth going."

Location: *Piss Alley. Tokyo.*

Beggar (whispering): "Kemono...Kemon...Kemono."

Location: Temple of the Bottomless Well. Kyoto.

Shinto Kakemono (dated Kōki 1, the year of the Emperor Jimmu): "The Land of Darkness is where the undead gather below the earth, and among them are demons who wish to live among us and who grow fat on our suffering. Such is the Beast. From below he can whisper. Through mirrors. Through shadow and through smoke. Through foul altars upon which blood is spilled. Those who hear him bend darkly to his will. One day -- he whispers -- one day he will unlock the door between our worlds. He just needs the right key. A key of souls."

Location: *Compound of Mariko Yashida. Yokohama.*

Mariko: "It is at once good to see you, Logan-san, even as it pains me to hold you in my gaze. I can tell you don't know how to be around me or even what to call me. I am still Mariko. I will always be Mariko to you. But I am also the Scarlet Samurai. You and I, we each have many lives beyond the one we shared. But that bond will always be there, no matter how many years pass, no matter what potential conflict or allyship awaits us. Your life now, I can sense, is a good one. Present circumstances aside, I trust that you have found a way to feel if not happy, then content. Know that you can drink your sencha freely. I have not tainted it with the poison of a blowfish, and my guards remain close no matter who visits me. I wish for you to stay, but I know that even this tea ceremony is time you cannot afford. What is the expression in English? The left hand isn't talking to the right hand? It is like this, I am afraid. There is a faction within the Hand. An extremist faction. They have gone their own way. Down a dark path. Muramasa has followed them. If you follow too, you will be led into the mountains, near Haku, where blood-red springs boil and a Shinto temple collects shadows. There a hammer sings against an anvil and the smoke of a sulfurous forge scents the wind."

Location: *Mount Haku.*

Crow: "*Kaw Kaw Kaw* Beast *Kak Kak Kak* Beast"

Hell.
Now.
Japan.
Then.
Sometimes, when lightning flashes and thunder follows...

...folks wonder about the speed of light.
But me--I'm always thinking about the speed of dark.
If it finds the right moment, it can spread fast and strong.
This was that right moment.

There was a breach between Arakko and Krakoa.
There was a breach between Earth and Hell.
All the boundaries were getting torn up.
And in this mess of shadows and light, past and present, death had come calling for us all.
Muramasa...
Save me, Logan-san.

THE CROOKED MARKET

REGENT: **MAD JIM JASPERS**

In every reality where there is a need, there is an enterprising soul to rise and meet it. But the truly most enterprising of all seek out the streets of the Crooked Market.

The Crooked Market is a sort of Otherworldian port city where nearly anything can be acquired for a price. As the Otherworld is the nexus of all realities, the Crooked Market is a popular place to go to acquire items from a foreign reality -- or even for a bit of illicit inter-reality goods-fencing.

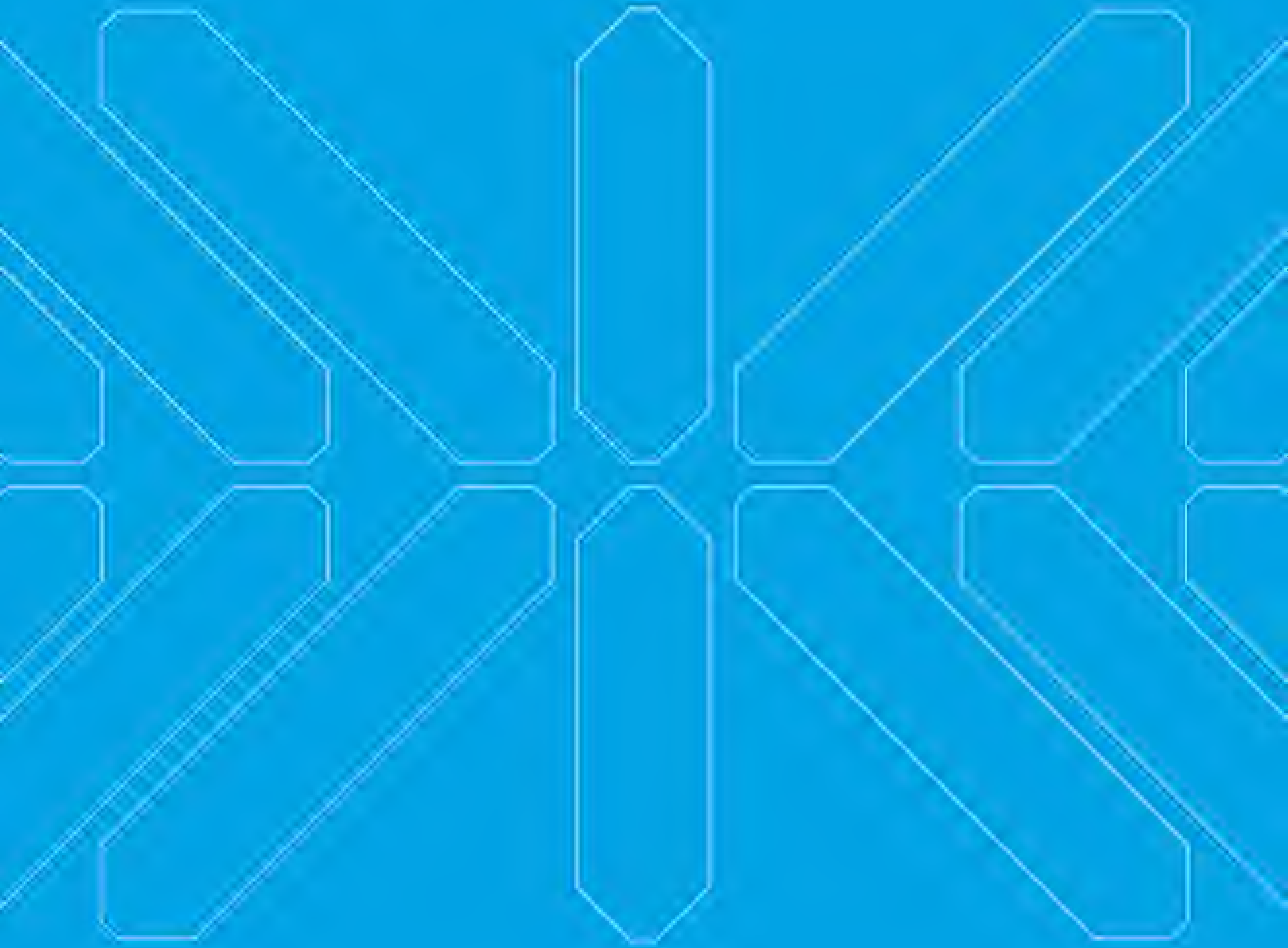
Like many of the kingdoms of Otherworld, the Crooked Market began as a small operation headed up by the reality refugee Mad Jim Jaspers and quickly attracted other reality refugees fleeing incursions. Today, the Crooked Market is a bustling crisscross of lamplit streets, noisy markets, lively pubs and dark alleyways.

The Crooked Market seems to circulate an almost baffling amount of wealth -- it seems impossible that so much should travel through one place in the Multiverse, but every kind of coin can pay for any kind of desire in the Crooked Market, and entire economies can form around the trading of goods that cannot meet anywhere else.

Travelers to the market are advised to be covertly armed. Do not trust anyone who presents as constabulary, as they are all known to be either highly corrupt or simply violent. It is said that it's foolish to worry about the sheriffs who walk with coins jingling in their pockets; it is the silent ones to worry about. The corrupt ones in the Crooked street do it for money -- the mad ones do it *for the thrill of it*.

Between the unfriendly locals and the labyrinthine streets and buildings, the only way to travel in the Crooked Market is with a local guide. There's always one willing -- and they're always ready to barter on the price -- but they're clever at making a deal that benefits them more than it does their client, so be wise.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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DUSTIN WEAVER

X-FORCE #13

[XOS] [X-F13]

PERCY
BOGDANOVIC
WILSON

PART 04 OF 22

CHAPTER

04

[X-Force_[0.13]
[X-Force_[0.13]

Killing is a truth. A sword is a piece of art. And killing an enemy with a sword is the truest art.

But every time you walk away the victor, your sword should feel heavier with the weight of a lost soul. This is the burden of the sharpest steel.

- SILVER SAMURAI

[X-Force_[0.X]
[X-Force_[0.X]

[X-Force_[0.13].....]
[X-Force_[0.13].....]

[X-Force_alpha.]

Then. Japan.
This Yomi temple celebrates the underworld.
But it's become something more than a place of prayer.
It's a *marriage* of two worlds.
A gateway to Hell.
I had spent the last twenty-four hours talking to every last friend and enemy in Japan.
Didn't believe what they told me. Not until I saw it myself.
I'd always known Muramasa as a madman, but a madman of honor.
Why would he serve the dark?
How had he become the swordsmith and servant and sacrifice of...
SNIKT SNIKT

...THE HAND?!

There's something other than men beneath these masks.
What have you gotten yourself caught up in, Muramasa?

"You are disappointed in me, Logan-san.
"But the Hand threatened to destroy my ancestral village if I didn't help them build an arsenal.
"I made their metal for the same reason you will fight for Krakoa.
"We're trying to protect the home that we love.

"I didn't know that once I finished outfitting their armory above...
"...they would require me below.
"The Hand once worshipped the Beast from the distance of a shrine and a prayer.
"Now they are one.
"Forged. Into a new kind of weapon.
"Did you know, Logan-san, that tamahagane is the metal used by Japanese swordsmiths..."

Before the blue steel is sharpened to a keen edge, before its hilt is fitted and its profile is shaped...
...before its blade thickness is settled upon, and before it is beaten and folded...
...iron sand must be smelted and refined with coal, a process of purification that purges all the unwanted elements.
And that requires unbearable *heat.*
There is no better forge than Hell because there is no greater blast furnace than Hell.

If I am a prisoner of this place, at least I can take comfort and pride in knowing...
...there will never be a better blade in existence.
I have long been considered the greatest swordsmith in the world.
KLANG
But now I am the greatest swordsmith in *all* the worlds.
KLING
But I must make haste...
...because it's almost time for *the ceremony.*

Later. Hell Hole.
Well, I'm certainly glad we've found each other.
Even if the accommodations are rather substandard.
I'm so curious about you. Especially your ability to regenerate.
Are you unkillable, then?
The two of us...were clearly meant for each other, as best friends or worst enemies.
How about this? How about while you...do your thing...
...I keep us entertained by telling you how I got here? Like everything about me, it's fascinating.
My name is Solem. It's possible you've heard of me.
And it's certain you'll never forget me.

"My quest began on the Blind Island off the coast of Arakko.
"I was charged with seeking out the Muramasa blade.
"This name meant nothing to me.
"So I traveled to a place where riddles are answered.
"The Oracle of Arakko."
I sense that you want information. About the swordsmith Muramasa.
There is a cost. There is always a cost.
But of course.
If I'm not mistaken, you're banished to this island no thanks to your sister? Morta Zang?
Will her severed head suffice? Or would you like me to fetch the rest of her?

How did you know what I would ask of you?
FWOOSH
You don't have to be an oracle to know how to seduce someone.
YEEHEEHEE!
Muramasa is dead.
But there is still a way to find him.
The Hellblade?
Anyone bit by that blade will go straight to Hell. Hell is where you will find Muramasa.
I'm afraid my ego is far too massive to consider suicide, my dear.

It is a key.
A key that opens the door to Hell.
This is where you will find a mutant made of metal.
A mutant who will serve as your guide to Muramasa.
Now. Hell Hole.
So here you are, and here I am.

Now take me to my sword, little man.
≠gasp≠
Well?
Now that you have your tongue, what do you have to say?
I'd say go to Hell...
...but we're already there.
You ain't the only one hunting for a Muramasa blade.
SNIKT
Am I hearing you correctly? Will the unkillable champion of Krakoa face off against the unbeatable champion of Arakko?
I do love the idea, even if I dislike the terms of the engagement.
If that's true...
KRINSH
Forged with hellfire. Don't bother.
...then maybe I should just kill you now.

Oh, don't bother with that either.
KRNSH
Adamantium-enforced.
Your skin's Adamantium? How the hell's that possible?
Think of it like a micro-fibrous version of chainmail. You can touch it, if you like.
Shall we be on our way then?
Muramasa is waiting.
What kind of game are you playing?
KLIK
A deadly one, to be sure.

INFURI, THE EVERFORGE:

REGENT: **FORGEMASTER FEDERAL**

A feudal kingdom of cybiote warriors who defend their land, Infuri is the site of one of the greatest weapons forges in all reality.

In a reality where a sun-dwelling Celestial threatened all of existence, it took the discipline and hero-slaying expertise of the Furies to subdue the Celestial when no one else could. Lashing it into the star where it dwelt to trap it in place, the Celestial fused with the energy there and formed the hottest structure in the known universe, the Living Sunstar. Rather than entrust such a volatile thing to that reality's defeated heroes, the Furies slew them all for their failure and took it with them back to the Otherworld. There, they took a province by force and founded their home by embedding the Living Sunstar into the ground itself and forming Infuri, the Everforge.

Weapons forged at the heart of the Living Sunstar are unbreakable and some of the finest in all reality. However, the presence of a sun in the center of their nation makes it a hard country indeed, and more and more unbearable as one nears the central forge itself -- but worth it for some of the finest blades in creation, forged by the greatest hero-killers of all time.

Lava, heat and flame are all parts of the land here, but the discipline of the Furies makes it liveable by a highly strict code. Land is passed down through centuries and contracts are sealed in blades and blood. The code of the Furies is a regimen of pain -- both given and received -- and their resistance to discomfort makes them expert smiths indeed.

Later.
The Hell Forge.
Trace of heat. He's not far.
You say this group--the Hand--has enslaved him?
They've always worshipped the Beast. But something's changed. They've leveled up.
How so?
Ripped the mask off one. He looked less like a man and more like a skull with two candles burning inside it. Possessed.
The lines are dissolving everywhere, then.
Krakoa is Arakko, and Arakko is Krakoa.
The Hand is the Beast, and the Beast is the Hand.
DONG DONG
Marriage is in the air.

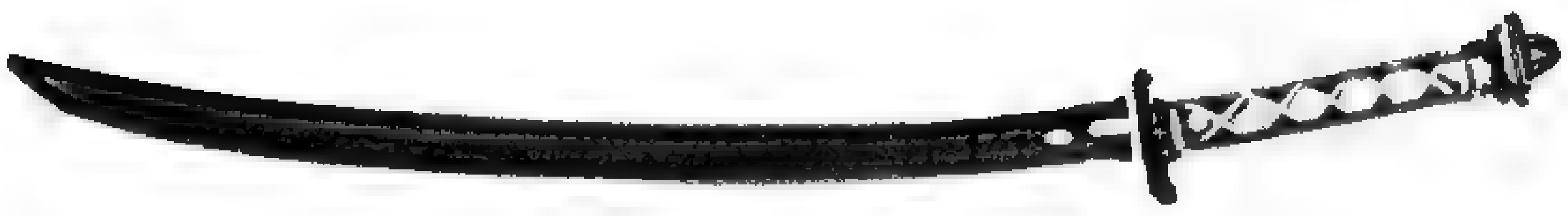
DONG DONG
We are here to celebrate the union...
...of my red left hand...
...and my red right hand.
There he is.
You'll have to be more specific. That demonic sack of flesh or a member of the faceless horde?

Now we welcome the presentation of swords.
Muramasa?
Hai!
CHING
CHING
CHING
CHING
CHING
CHING
CHING
For you. I put my very soul into them.

Two swords?
Guess we don't have to kill each other over who goes home with steel. We can--
--share?
Strip them down and gear up.
I would hate to show up to a wedding underdressed. It's just bad form.
Hrrm.
This marriage heralds a new dawn. A red dawn.
Between human and demon...
...the one I call my daughter and the one I shall claim as my son.
You may now consummate your union...
...with a kiss of steel.

Wait!
I have something for the happy couple.
And it's a *damned* good gift if I do say so myself.
I'll take that.
You kill my husband, and then steal his sword?
For this there will be *hell* to pay!
KRINSH
SLNCH
Your heart will bleed as mine does.
Impossible.

Look at you. Helping a friend in need. Such kindness.
No! My marriage is lost. My sword won't be too!
Forgot to mention something, tough guy.
Muramasa blades can cut through Adamantium.
This is a transgression beyond sin.
Hell will never forget.
I have both katanas. I've killed the groom, stabbed the bride, and could easily abandon you to this demonic wedding party.
But I'll admit I'm feeling generous. You helped me get this far, after all.
I know, I know. Why would I help you? If we're potentially going to face each other in contest? If my flesh can be breached by one of these blades?
And the answer is... I'm a good, fair, generous person.
So...
...wanna buy a blade, little man?
What do you want for it?



SWORD: MURAMASA BLADE

Weight: 1,421 grams

Blade Length: 80 cm.

Material: *tamahagane*, leather, *honoki*, soul

Place of Origin: the Hell Forge

Maker: Muramasa -- swordsman, swordsmith, madman

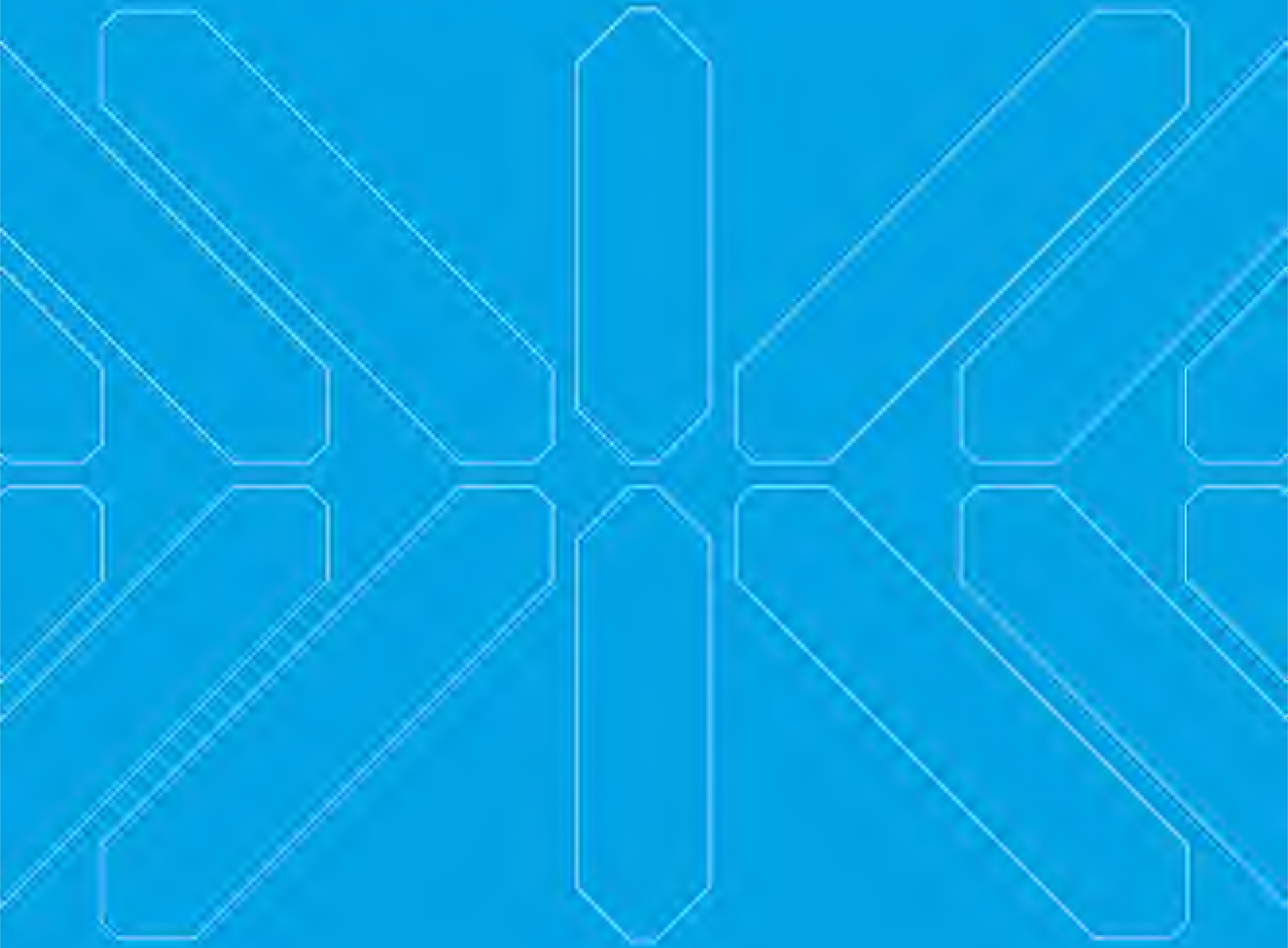
Secret History: One day, when Muramasa was just a boy, he pretended a stick into a sword. He slashed and feinted and stabbed as he worked his way along a rice paddy and through a forest. A windblown clump of maiden grass was an attacking samurai, clouds were looming dragons. When a flash of green rose up before him, he swatted at it on instinct and felled a bird known as mejiro, a Japanese white-eye. He stood over its fluttering body until it went still. A bubble of blood emerged from its open beak and burst. He cupped its still-warm body in his hands and wept. He apologized for the life he had stolen. And then something escaped its carcass. A mist-like essence. A soul. It hung in the air, as if waiting for him. He waved a hand through it and felt a cold pulse as it gloved his skin, clinging to him. Because it belonged to him. When he picked up the stick again, the soul soaked from his grip into the wood, hardening it with a creak and moan. It was alive, he understood. Inhabited. Strengthened. And when he swung the stick again and brought it down upon a nearby boulder, the stone shattered.

The Forging: When Muramasa makes any weapon -- whether a katana or a shuriken, a war fan or armor -- he does so with the care of an artist. But in some cases -- some very special cases -- he elevates his art to the level of sorcery by investing a soul into the metal. This welding of steel and soul is a folding and smelting of the earthen and spiritual planes, an elemental merger, a key. A key between worlds. And it is also a deal made with death. A soul, or a portion thereof, has been harvested. And nothing hungers for and aims to spite the living like the dead. His blade wounds like no other.

Hell: The realms of the dead have been slighted by Muramasa. He is a thief many times over as a keeper of souls. The devils gnash their teeth and click their claws, because he owes them an immortal debt. And there is one -- the Beast -- who wants this debt repaid in servitude.

Krakoa. Later.
I have my sword.
But it came with a price.
SHNK
Only time will tell if it was worth the cost.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[XOS] [MAR13]

AYALA
LOLLI
DELGADO

PART 05 OF 22

CHAPTER 05

[Marauders_[0.13]
[Marauders_[0.13]

When the fire swept through, we were trapped, just waiting to die. But then *she* came...I've never felt so safe. She was so calm, but you could ***feel*** the power in her, you know? Not the weather stuff, but something else. I just ***knew***, no matter what else happened, she was there, and we were gonna be okay.

- S.A. GRAHAM,
ONSLAUGHT SURVIVOR

[Marauders [0.X]
[Marauders [0.X]

[Marauders_[0.13].....]
[Marauders_[0.13].....]

[Marauders_alpha.]

Krakoa, before the storm.
I know what I must do, but for the first time in a long time, my *purpose* and my *heart* war with each other.
Once goddess, once queen, one sword with which to split the sky in twain. Vibranium inlaid, a tempest contained, the wrath of heavens comes wielding a legacy.
Thought I'd find you here.
Oh?

You tend to surround yourself with ***green*** whenever you have something weighing on your mind.
And what makes you think I feel anything but determined?
Please. We've known each other too long for me not to notice the little crease you get between those perfect eyebrows when you're troubled.
The sword. It seemed like a bunch of nonsense talk, but... you know what it means, don't you?
I... yes. Yes, I do.
But I do not know if I am ready for what taking it will mean.
And what's that, exactly?
An ***end,*** I think. Heartache and strife, at the least.
What is it, Ororo? Tell me.

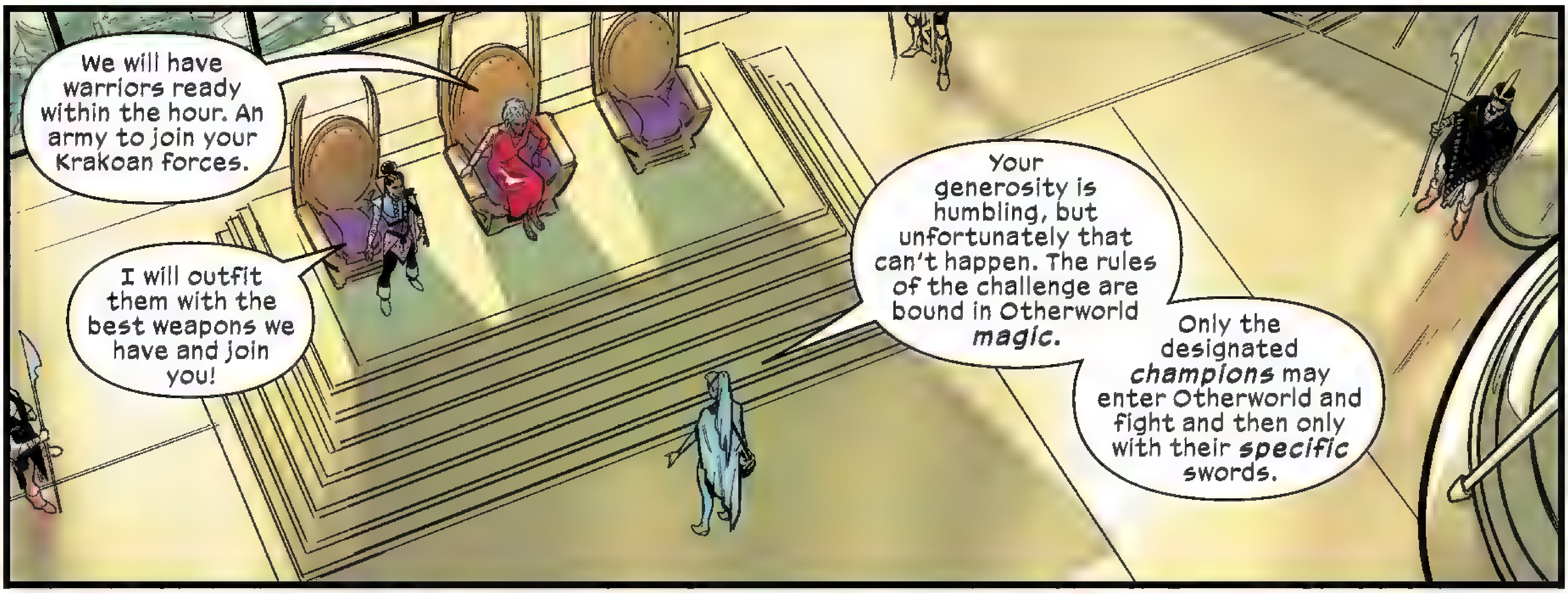
Better yet, let me come with you.
My sword may not be meant for *the big fight*, but it will *always* be at your service.
Thank you, Kate. But I must face this alone.
sigh Figured you'd say that. And it's fine--you know what you have to do.
I'll keep a lamp burning in the window so you can find your way home.
They say it began with a blinding flash of light...

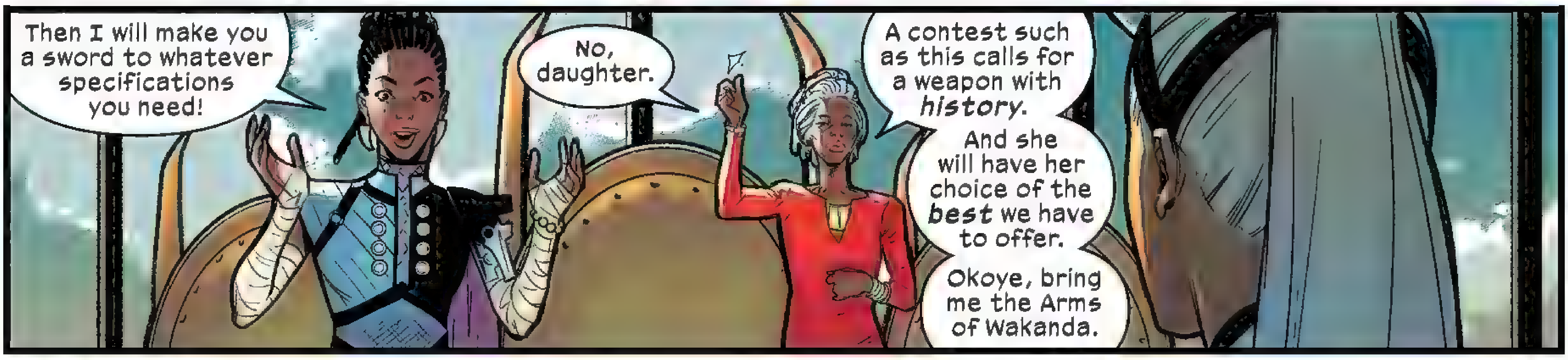
...with the sky *splitting open*, and striking a sacred mountain.
Inside they would find a gift from the heavens. A metal so pure that to touch it in its raw form was to *know* the truth of the universe.
The ancestors of those that would become Wakandan forged a weapon to speak with the boom of thunder.
The first Wakandan king, the first protector, was a wise and just man.
When their enemies came to wreck and ravage, he begged them to turn around.
He warned them that he held in his hand a conduit to heaven and that they would not survive it.
They did not heed him. And so he showed them the power that split heaven and their holy mountain.
Skybreaker.

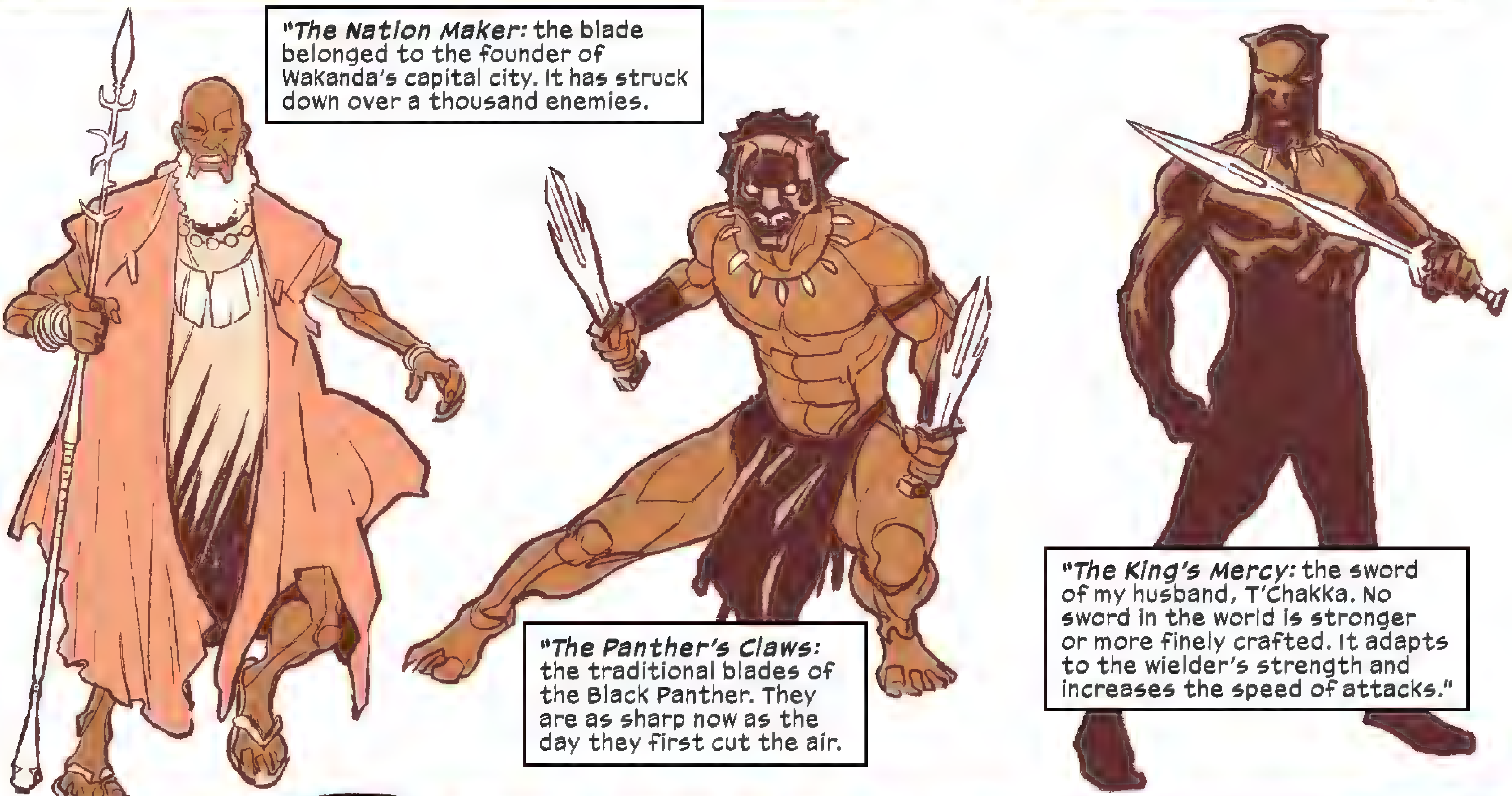
When the wise king grew old, he passed the sword to his child.
The weapon passed from chief to chief, from protector to protector.
It held back those who would destroy the fledgling nation, gave them the safety to learn and grow.
Skybreaker, the Voice of the Heavens.
Its edge is sharper than any other blade forged by man and will never grow dull.
The weapon bore more fruit than protection.
Studying the metal gave the Wakandan people an advantage.
It helped them develop their natural and medical sciences.
The conduit helped them unlock a deeper understanding of the world and develop technology at a blistering pace.
It helped catapult Wakanda into the future.

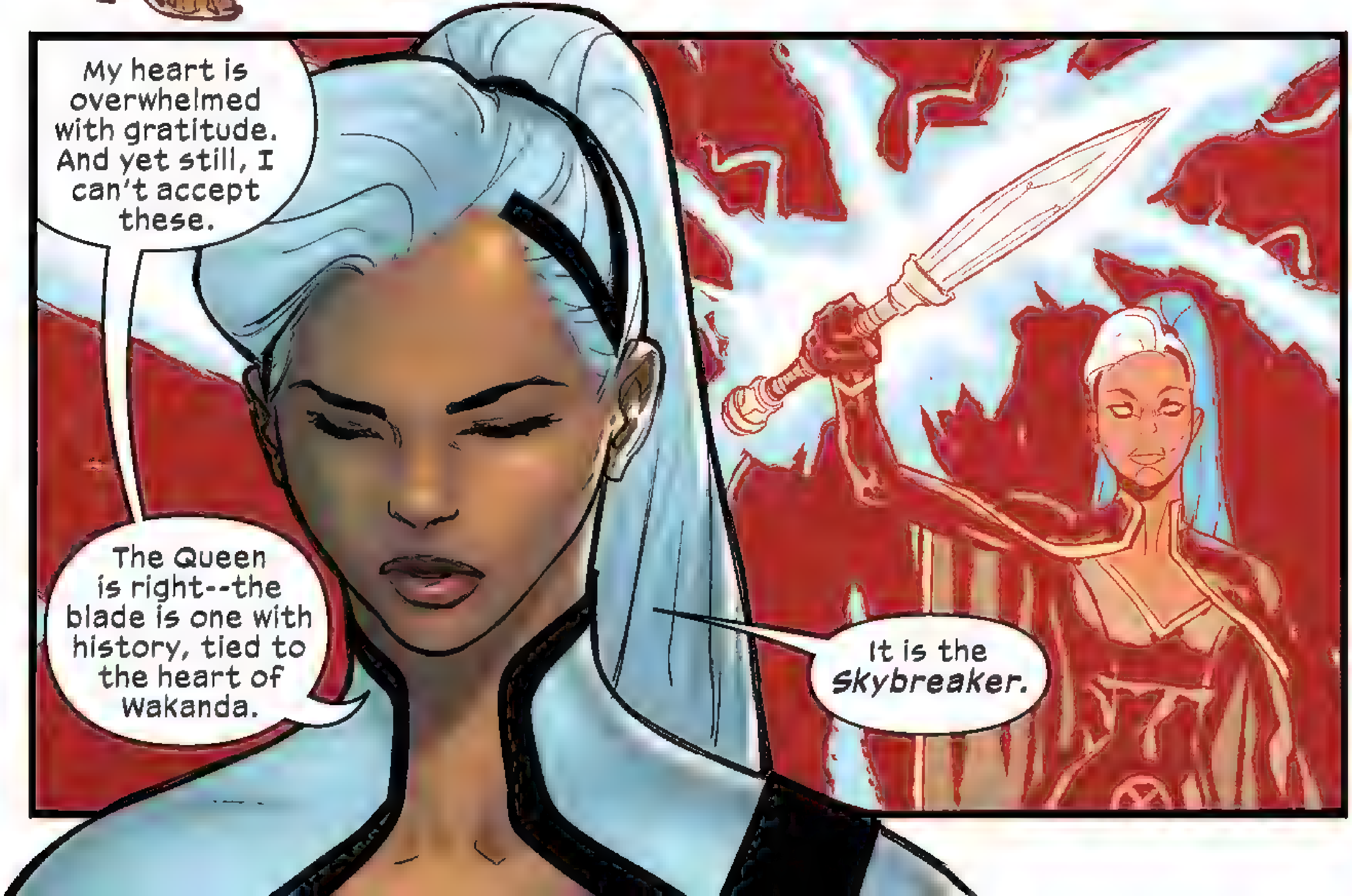
And you are prepared to address the UN regarding their inquiries?
They have shown... *concern* for our well-being.
But I will, of course, assure them that Wakanda is as strong as she has ever been.
My queen, you have a *petitioner.*
Now?
I believe you will make an exception for her.
This humble servant is grateful for the time he was given.
I apologize for the late hour.
Still, I hope you will grant me an audience.
For you? Always. It is good to see you, Ororo.
And you, Queen-Mother.
But where is *the king?*
Once again, my son's duties to the world take him away from Wakanda, though he *is* due to return any day now.
But you know that I take audience when he is away, and I will happily hear you.
Of course, Queen-Mother.
It was not my intention to be rude to you or any of the royal family.
And no offense was taken.
What brings you to Wakanda, Storm?
Are you here as a sister or as a *diplomat* for Krakoa?

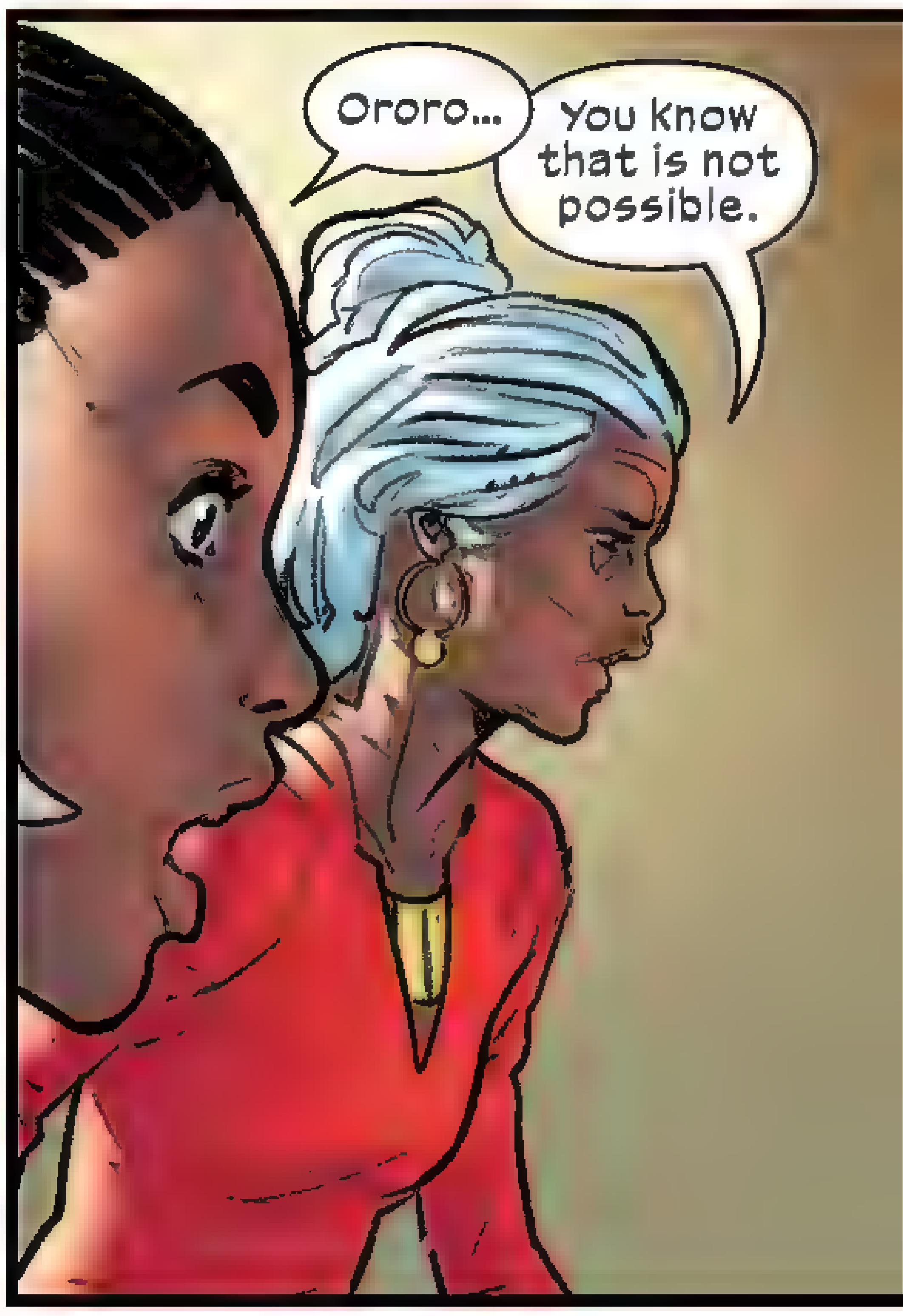
Both, and more.
Krakoa is in danger, and I come to plead for Wakanda's aid, but not just for our sake.
If *Krakoa* falls, then the *world* falls.
Strong words. Do not dance around the danger--what is coming?
And how can Wakanda stand with you?
"An army, led by the original four horsemen of Apocalypse has breached Otherworld, the melting-place of all realities, and threatens to come through to ours.
"The army of Arakko covets what we have and wishes to destroy everything that is not twisted and cruel like themselves.
"Their march was halted by the only being powerful enough to force their impasse, but *she* is no more kind or just than they are. She has made a game of things.
"The terms of the game are a contest of champions. Ten of theirs and ten of ours.
"I have been chosen to stand for Krakoa, and I am in need of my sword. That is why I have come to you.
"Wakanda has a vital role to play in this."


We will have warriors ready within the hour. An army to join your Krakoan forces.
I will outfit them with the best weapons we have and join you!
Your generosity is humbling, but unfortunately that can't happen. The rules of the challenge are bound in Otherworld *magic*.
Only the designated *champions* may enter Otherworld and fight and then only with their *specific* swords.


Then I will make you a sword to whatever specifications you need!
No, daughter.
A contest such as this calls for a weapon with *history*.
And she will have her choice of the *best* we have to offer.
Okoye, bring me the Arms of Wakanda.


"***The Nation Maker:*** the blade belonged to the founder of Wakanda's capital city. It has struck down over a thousand enemies.
"***The Panther's Claws:*** the traditional blades of the Black Panther. They are as sharp now as the day they first cut the air.
"***The King's Mercy:*** the sword of my husband, T'Chakka. No sword in the world is stronger or more finely crafted. It adapts to the wielder's strength and increases the speed of attacks."


My heart is overwhelmed with gratitude. And yet still, I can't accept these.
The Queen is right--the blade is one with history, tied to the heart of Wakanda.
It is the *Skybreaker.*


Ororo...
You know that is not possible.

It would be disaster. People would *riot!*
You know very well, Ororo, that only the *king* may lay hands on the *Skybreaker.* And he is *not here.*
Good Queen-Mother, please, you know I would not ask if the fate of Krakoa--of *the world*--weren't at stake. But there is not time to *wait.*
If I don't appear at the meeting place with the sword soon, we have already lost.
You ask *much* of us, and if it were up to me I would grant your request. The fate of your people--and the world--are worth the risk of the anger. But I cannot.
My son will return in the next few days. You can ask *him* for what you need.
Until then, you will of course stay as an honored guest.
I...
Of course, Queen Ramonda.
I am grateful for both your wisdom and your kindness.

SEVALITH

REGENTS: **COUNTEX OUBLIA AND COUNTEX OSCURA**

The blood-drinking socialites of Sevalith do not know our word for *vampire*, but their kingdom is kept midnight-dark, and the living do not last long there.

—

One of the Otherworld's longest reigning nations, Sevalith drips in blood and is bound by curses. For as long as Sevalith has existed within the wheel, it has been a study in opposites -- brutal cathedrals wedged and stacked like coffins in geometric shapes dot the landscape, concealing a larval, soft people within. Hideous sharp-toothed night creatures don meters of sumptuous fabric and crown themselves in jewels, bedecking their fierceness with a haunting beauty.

—

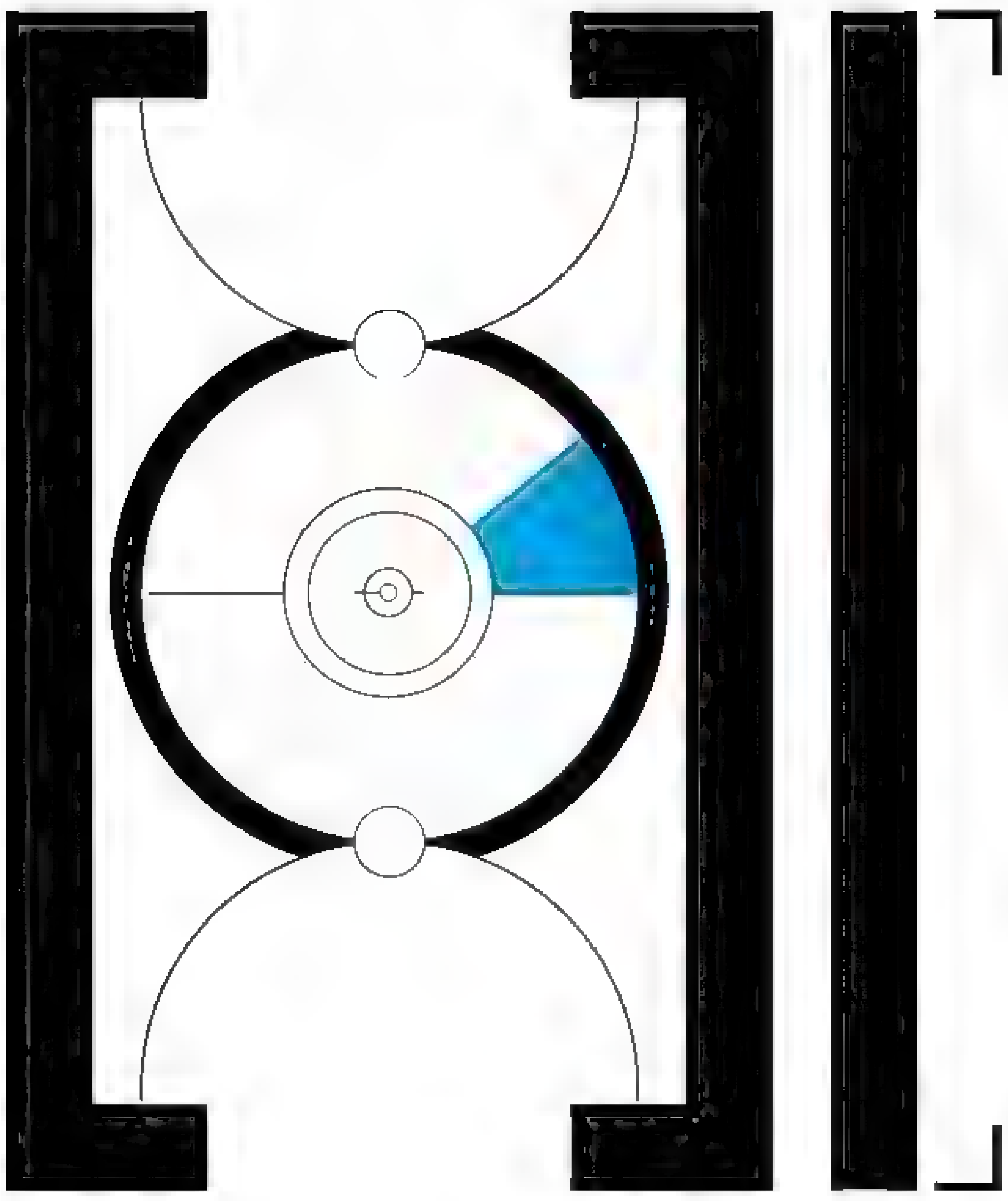
The ancient ruling class of Sevalith have collected the wealth of ages within their dark doors, sitting like dragons upon millennia of hoarded treasures that grow dusty and unspent. Meanwhile, Sevalith pulses under dark skies, the ebb and flow of blood and secrets in the circulatory streets. With treasure nearly worthless and blood always in supply, the Sevalithi political landscape is a minefield of intricate curses, bonds and favors. Each and every member of their ruling class find themselves inextricably bound to every other.

—

Externally, Sevalithi diplomacy is typically patient and reasonable, if not a little slow -- *long life spans are not known for fostering haste among cultures* -- but does share a long-running rivalry with the kingdom of Avalon. Where Avalon is a kingdom of bright magic and virtue, Sevalith is a kingdom of darkness and blood, in which beauty is merely a lark to festoon the deadly. The thrones of each nation consider themselves in a chilly but tense peace, but nearer to the borders it is said the cultures illicitly intermingle, each naturally intrigued by a taste of their opposite.

—

Assassins of Sevalith are said to be some of the finest anywhere, as undetectable as a bad dream, but the only currency Sevalith honors is favors, and it is wise to stay out of their tangled web. But their silence and skill can be a necessity, as the wide, cloudy plains between the cities of Sevalith hum with an eerie quiet. Perhaps any discord within the province is kept inside the heavy black walls -- or perhaps it is snuffed out quickly. Or perhaps it is an honest peace, borne of their age -- could a kingdom of the unaging learn to perhaps truly thrive among one another, given enough time to build?



MERCATOR

REGENT: **?**

Previously known as the home of the **Telmenetes**, **Mercator** has been recently renamed.

The **Telmenetes** never gave their province a name despite their time there, as they had hoped to only visit. Refugees fleeing a reality that could no longer support their highly evolved existence, they came to Saturnyne, petitioning the citadel directly for a home in the Otherworld. Moved by their ambition to survive and the evolved and awe-inspiring story of their species, Saturnyne graciously gave them their own province.

As beings of what is mostly perceived as light, the Telmenetes' unique physiology required them to form and shape their environment to best suit their needs. As a result, much of the Telmenetes' province was unable to be visited by many. However, the Telmenetes are very kind and intelligent, and were often willing and able to act as guides for visitors through their home.

However, the presence of Telmenetes guides at the borders began to diminish rapidly following something Starlight Citadel official statements described as a "loud inverted pop" in the Otherworld itself. Watchtowers from all nearby provinces and the citadel itself report seeing a flickering darkness slowly but surely overcome the **Telmenetes** territory, as if the lights were being snuffed out one by one.

Today, there are no Telmenetes guards at the borders and their leadership is silent. New leadership claims dominion over the province and has only sent shadowy vassals who share the new kingdom's name -- **Mercator**.

He promises he is keeping it safe.

But the king would like it closed to the public until he feels it is ready.

TWREE
TWREE
Come in.
I *know* you have been up here since you were shown your rooms and haven't called for dinner yet.
I thought to myself, "Shuri, you cannot let Ororo brood alone on an empty stomach."
I hope you will allow me to intrude on your evening for a while?
This is your home, and I am the guest.
I would be honored to share a meal with you.
A bit formal for someone whose brother you called husband.
I would like to think we share love for each other. Why not tell me what is on your mind?

I know you are *frustrated* that you will have to wait for T'Challa's return, but surely you can understand the position you put my mother in.
It wasn't my intention to make anyone's life more difficult.
But if T'Challa does not return soon, the consequences will be... regrettable.
What you ask, it could lead to discord among the people.
There are already those who think little of my brother and our family and might use this as an excuse to incite revolt. This could cost *lives,* Ororo...
Even before I was queen, I always believed in taking care of the needs of the people above my own.
If it were up to me, I would not put Wakanda in such a position. I don't want to cause any strife.
But what waits on the other side of the gates in Otherworld does not care about *good intentions* or *political alliances.*
The enemy will overwhelm and consume everything.
At *best,* we and everyone we love will be at their mercy. At worst, we will be *annihilated.*
Some would say the same thing about your Krakoa. Taking what you want, wresting control of economic markets, flooding the world with your cure-all flowers...
And now you ask for something that could be used to destabilize Wakanda.
This contest of champions comes at a very... *interesting* time.
We found cures that will take humanity decades, perhaps *centuries.* Our *flowers* have saved thousands of lives already. We *happily* shared, asking only to be accepted as a *people* in return.
Do...do you really *believe* this is a ploy by Krakoa to hurt Wakanda?
Do you think *so little* of mutants--of *me?*

Of *course not*, Ororo! Wakanda may not have signed a treaty with Krakoa, but we freely welcome mutants here and have *never* discriminated against them.
And whatever differences *we* have had, pushing past them has only made us closer. I believe you, as does my mother, but you *have* to see this from our perspective.
Even the most future-minded of us honor our ancestors--our *history*. There are those here who would see this as an act of *war* by Krakoa, even if my mother herself reassured them it was not!
They would use this as an excuse to cause dissent among the people. This could lead to Wakandan blood running in the streets.
The *other side* is also of concern to me.
I have been tasked with fighting for--possibly *dying* for--the safety and continued existence of *Earth*. On which *both* Wakanda *and* Krakoa sit.
All the more reason to wait for T'Challa.
He would want to have the chance to help in every way he can.
My brother... the two of you are *finally* back to a place of mutual respect and affection.
Don't let impatience damage all the work you have put into repairing your relationship.
Your brother has ignored my calls for his help because they are not convenient for him to answer right now.
But Krakoa goes to war for *you* as much as for itself.
Before I was Storm of the X-Men, I was a protector of the plains. They called me Goddess.
I know sacrifice, and I know suffering. I know the weight of people's need and dependence on my power and choices.
I know who *I* am. And I know what I must *do*.

I don't mean to imply that the danger Krakoa is in is less worthy than Wakanda, only that you ask--
I won't ask anything further of Wakanda.
Now, please, I don't mean to be rude, but it is late and I would like to rest.
It has been a long and stressful few days.
Ororo, I--
We can take up this argument when the sun is shining, all right?
Save me a space next to you for breakfast?
Right...
For a time, you were called Ororo Iquadi T'Challa, and we were sisters.
It is out of that sisterly love that I ask you, please--remember that I have a duty to my people that supersedes all others.
And in the spirit of that same love, please understand that so do I.
Goodbye, Storm.
Goodbye, Shuri.

What I tell Shuri is true. I know *who* I am...
...and I know what I must *do.*
KRA-
KOW
The Temple of the Heart of Wakanda. Then.
--after our main weapons moved beyond the sword, it became a symbol of the spirit of Wakanda.
It is sacred, never to be taken from Wakandan soil.

Now.
Once again, the story begins with lightning.
KRA-ZZZZT
There will be more analog obstacles inside, but the cameras and most technology-based security are down for now.
I have less than half an hour before it comes back online.
Surge detected. System reboot in 30 minutes.
Instead of revelation, this time there is *darkness.*
I overload the facility with energy, causing it to shut down to prevent permanent damage. Its power is on a separate grid from the system that sends energy into the city.

If you are to be my queen, you must know our truths.
This facility is under 24 hour surveillance by the priests. The drones patrol the exterior and feed their information to the priests, who in turn report daily to an offsite facility.
There are priests at every intersection in every corridor.
I do not have time to find a way around them, and so I must go through.
I have to remind myself that even as I hurt these innocent people, I do it so that I can save their lives.
This is for the greater good.
I repeat it with every blow--a mantra.
I regret that I will have given them another reason to fear the dark.
System reboot in 25 minutes.

You will *not* succeed here, traitor.
WOOOSH
Hnah!
More ruthless men than you have failed to stop me my entire life, good priest.
Ngh!
You shame yourself!
Only if it is shameful to fight for what is *right.*
KRAK
May you never know what was at stake here.
-groan-
System reboot in 22 minutes.

There it is, the *Skybreaker.*
The lasers are invisible but no less deadly for that. They slice through anything short of Vibranium.
Enough to dissuade even the most clever of thieves, *eh?*
A part of me wonders if T'Challa knew that I might need to infiltrate this place someday, that he might ***want me*** to succeed in bypassing these measures, if the need was great enough.
The lasers were not constructed to withstand such bitter cold.
They are the last step between me and my goal. I need them to *fall.*
There is a good chance the failure triggers a secondary alarm, but I have no choice.
The lack of screeching sirens and metal doors slamming closed are a hopeful sign.
Skybreaker.
The heart and pride of Wakanda.
Even after all I have seen, I must admit that what was achieved here is truly a wonder of nature and man.
It is ***sacrilegious*** to interfere, to ***touch,*** but I must. Or else even the mighty Wakanda will fall.
System reboot in 18 minutes.
SHOOM

I hoped that my intuition would be wrong and that I would not find you here.
Stand aside, Princess Shuri.
You know I *can't*. If you take **Skybreaker,** you will cause strife among the people. Brother will fight brother, all because you could not *wait.*
There is *no time,* Shuri. You could *hide* the fact that it is gone.
There is no hiding what you have done. You would leave us bleeding while you run off and possibly die fighting in some *game?*
You are my sister, Shuri, and I...
I'm *sorry* it has come to this.
System reboot in 15 minutes.

If you won't move, then I will move you!
Ororo, don't do this, *please.*
We could go back to the palace-- *mph!*
WOOSH
Come with me. We will pardon you. It is not too late!
You still act as if what is happening is at *your* whim. So arrogant!
I am trying to ***save you,*** and you are worried about ***saving face!***
What I care about is saving ***my people*** from the damage ***you*** will cause them.
I tried to reason with you, Ororo, for both of our people's sake.
System reboot in 12 minutes.

You leave me no choice.
All of this is a choice. Yours *and* mine.
You have chosen selfishly.
I will not allow your choice to damn us all.
PZZZZHH
You underestimate me, *sister.*
You forget that I have worn the mantle of protector as often as inventor.

I will ask a final time, Shuri.
Stand down.
Help me save us *all.*
CLANG
All you had to do was *wait.*
All you had to do was *trust* me.
She is fast. Her skill is *undeniable.*
It makes this all the more easy.
You *will* come back with me to the palace. And together, we will speak to T'Challa.
I'm *sorry,* sister.
I love you all too much to let you stop me.
KR-ZZZZT

-groan-
Removing the sword will trip a citywide alert.
Replacing it with a fake may buy me time by keeping the system from going into complete lockdown.
I can only hope it worked.
System reboot complete.

Breach detected. Lock-down protocols initiated.
Panic will serve no one.
SLAM
Having been married to the king has advantages.
Knowing his royal command codes, for example...
ACCESS DENIED
...unless, of course, that has been accounted for.
ACCESS DENIED
King's authorization code does not match DNA signature
I did not want to leave lasting damage here. I'd hoped to bring the sword back and leave it safely in the temple after...
But there is no time for sentimentality now.

PWURRRRRRR
Intruder detected.
Skybreaker Protocol initiated.
THNK THNK THNK THNK THNK THNK
My beloved *ex*-husband failed to inform me about *this.*

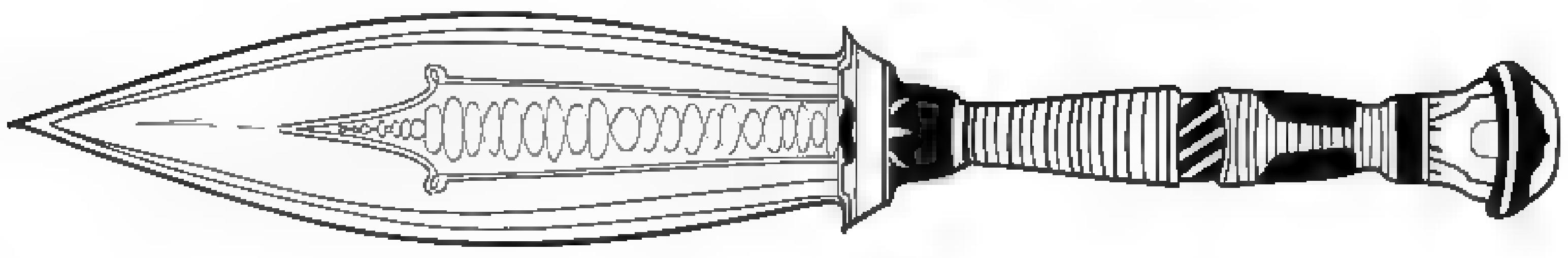
ZZZWOMP
NAAARRRGH!

WOOOM
Ngh!
Enough!
KZZT
KZZT
+pant pant pant+

"My mother said you came claiming to be in need of aid..."

...and yet here we find you, stealing from those who welcomed you.
There is no time for bureaucratic games, T'Challa. Not with what is at stake.
She has the *Skybreaker*, my king!
I can see that.
At ease.
Why, Ororo?
You know I would do anything for you. Even *this*. Why betray me like this?
This has nothing to do with you, T'Challa, or with *us*.
I am here so that I can save *my people*.
Your people?
I remember a time when Wakandans were your people.
We could be again, if you would just *wait* and *listen*.

My life does not revolve around your whims, even if my heart aches with missing you.
You will step aside, because you know that anything else would be the end of us all.
My king--
Stand. *Down.*
I have never known you to be malicious or untruthful.
If it is as you told my mother, then I cannot in good conscience stop you.
We could have done this *together*, my love. I would do anything for you.
This is bigger than you and I, T'Challa. Bigger than Wakanda or Krakoa.
And I could not *wait* for you to *decide* that you had the time.
...
Let her go.
Destroy the gate.
If the emissary of Krakoa wishes to return, it will not be as a thief in the night but with the permission and grace of Wakanda, *if* we so *choose.*



SWORD: SKYBREAKER

Weight: 2,000 grams

Blade Length: an arm's length, full tang .

Material: Vibranium (pure), leather (panther), *precious metals* (inlay/ornamental), African Black Wood

Place of Origin: Wakanda

Maker: Olumọ, first Father of Wakanda

Attributes: Skybreaker is a conduit; it can convert small amounts of energy into exponentially larger amounts of energy, amplifying and channeling that energy. The edge will never get dull. In fact, the only way the metal changes shape is through extreme heat -- no amount of pressure or strikes on its cold edge will cause any change. The blade itself is unbreakable. Acting as a conduit does not change the temperature of the blade -- it is lukewarm to cold to the touch unless submerged in extreme heat.

The Forging: The name of the forger of the blade has been lost to time, but his title -- Olumọ, ***Knower*** -- has persisted. It was he who realized that no normal fire could tame the metal, and he who built a special forge near the lip of a volcano. There, he, his oldest daughter and his oldest son stayed for many days, using the heat of the volcano to soften and temper the metal. It took them three weeks to reach the volcano, another month to forge the blade and hone the edge. When they had finished, it took them another two weeks to find wood for the handle of the sword.

Secret History: The Skybreaker is an object of the purest Vibranium. The mountain the Vibranium was found in was struck by a meteorite -- a remnant of a planet whose sun went supernova. The radiation emanating from the meteorite purified the Vibranium at a molecular level and imbued it with its strange conduit properties.

Prolonged contact with the metal causes damage to living tissues (any energy it absorbs is amplified, and channeled outward), but strengthens non-living materials (even if they were once biological in origin). The damage to living tissues manifests in a variety of ways, from burns to cancers, but even one layer of protection (a hilt, wrap, sheath or even a piece of cloth) stops the energy transfer. The changes in inert tissues manifests in a strengthening of the material -- stone and metals become harder, wood becomes more resilient (the hilt is by now stronger than steel), leather more supple and harder to tear. The effects have long been studied by Wakandan scientists and mystics but have never been satisfactorily explained.

Was it what you expected?
Worse, I believe.
We have not lost allies, but there will be a lot of work to get back *trust*.
Hold fast. You did what needed to be done, Storm.
I have been a protector longer than I have been a wife.
I know the sacrifices that *must* be made.
I know who *I* am.
Never doubted you for a second, darlin'.
Welcome to the party.

SJ SEGOVIA
20
GHO

HELLIONS #5

[XOS] [HEL5]

WELLS
CARNERO
CURIEL

PART 06 OF 22

CHAPTER
06

[hell_[0.5]
[ions_[0.5]

Remember always that our mutations were born from pain. When we train our gifts on our enemies, we train our sorrow, our past, our battered souls. Let us be wary of using these sacred things for war.

-NIGHTCRAWLER

[hell [0.X]
[ions_[0.X]

[hell_[0.5].....]
[ions_[0.5].....]

[Hellions_alpha.]

Two days ago.
Before the culling.
The resurrection of Manuel de la Rocha,
A.K.A. Empath.
Nnnnnngh!

@#$%!
Where the @#$% am I?!
Easy now... What's your name, child?
What's YOUR name?!
Keep your #$%@ hands off me!
All right. We're not doing that, then.

Hope, will you finish up here? I sense... a visitor.
Are you gonna stand there like an idiot, or are you gonna tell me how I died? All I remember is getting on a transport to Nebraska.
Then that's the last time Cerebro backed you up.
I don't know what happened after that because I didn't ask because I *truly* don't care.
Pretty #$@% system you have here, and you're terrible at your job.
We just brought you back to life. Would it kill you to show a little gratitude?
We'll never know.
My god. I'm tapping out.
Hey! Where's the crowd of fawning idiots? Aren't they gonna shout my name?
We were thinking you should just go out the back.
Whatever.
PTOO
COME ON! THIS IS A STERILE ENVIRONMENT!
Hatch someone who gives a #@$%.

Today. The Quiet Council.
Apocalypse mortally wounded, the External Gate sealed, and Rockslide's mutilation undoing the safety net of resurrection.
It's hard to believe that so much has gone so wrong at once.
There are great forces at work here.
Krakoa bends.
The Contest of Swords is compelling to our people, as evidenced by the Council members not in attendance.
As we stand against the tournament, do we lose more than we gain?
Yes. What good is the Council if we sit atop a fractured state?
Sure. But shouldn't we be more worried that so many mutants are entering a life or death STABBING TOURNAMENT?
Don't get me wrong, I like sitting around acting fancy as much as the next guy--
--unless the next guy is Sebastian Shaw--
--but maybe we should do something?
Let's have everyone's attention on me, please!
Young Katherine's words have touched me--
Pthew!
Watch your tassels, buffoon.
Plumage, you philistine.

The heroes of both Krakoa and Arakko travel their globes, collecting swords for the privilege of dancing into a *meat grinder.*
Really no need to stand--
Let's raise our hand if we have something to say, dear.
What if we denied the Arakkii that privilege?
What if we let my Hellions do what they do best? Lie, cheat and steal until Arakko's swords are *ours.*
How would they challenge us then?
Force a forfeit.
You see? Emma loves it!
Though someone should tell her face.
We win without spilling a drop of Krakoan blood.
I don't need the weird kid who smells like milk to tell me Krakoa likes that.
GET YOUR JAW OFF THE FLOOR, YOU BIG BEAUTIFUL ISLAND!
Just ignore him.
Shall we vote?
I won't support a plan that sends more mutants to Otherworld, not while they can't be safely resurrected.
I agree. But the Council still rules.
So yes, a vote. Five hands to pass.
All in favor of Sinister's plan?

Compassion and reason win!
We may yet end this nightmare before the slaughter comes...
It's settled, then.
The Hellions march into Arakko to end the tournament before it starts, the fearless Mr. Sinister leading the way.
What was that last part?
A task of this magnitude isn't suitable for *grunts*, surely.
They need their leader. They need ***MR. SINISTER.***
Show of hands?
Wait...
This is madness. The man doesn't know the difference between tassels and--
THE FLOOR WAS MINE, BENNET!
Four hands.
Oh, thank sweet god.

That's that. Where were we? Oh, right--
I'll need my *full* team. Including *Havok.*
I heard about his little trip to Otherworld. Following your daughter around like a puppy dog, no doubt. I'm beginning to think she's a bad influence. Tsk tsk.
I don't want to get into how she was raised, but I'd thank you to keep her away from my boy.
I'd like to change my vote.
Oh, I don't think you can--
The Council does not lead from the safety of this chamber. It's time to get your hands dirty, Sinister.
Yes, but--
IT'S FINAL THEN!
You should leave soon, Sinister.
The fate of Krakoa is in your hands.

DRYADOR → FIEFDOM OF AMENTH

REGENT: **FAMINE, PESTILENCE**

The Kingdom of Dryador has fallen to the armies of **Amenth. Famine** and **Pestilence** of Arakko now sit upon the throne.

What was once the Kingdom of Seventy Seas now sizzles in the flames of war. The Last Watchtower of Del Di Lorr is conquered. Those who attempted to flee were given plague for their rescuers, a gift to repay their foolishness.

The oceans have been boiled, the tender fish-flesh of their most innocent making a fine feast for the battle-weary conquering army. The towers have been broken open, leaving their scholars and healers to gasp and choke on naught but burning ash, the once-soft sand of the shores turning to black glass in the heat. Dryador has become a hard place to welcome a hard people.

Famine and Pestilence, along with their siblings **War** and **Death**, consider the province an extension of their kingdom -- Arakko. Most have given the recently wartorn region a wide berth, and little is known about life inside the province under its new rulers. However, some unscrupulous entrepreneurs have been in and out of the land already, seeking the finest fresh catch in all Otherworld.

Hellions Staging Theater.
A.K.A. Purgatory.
The Council has asked that you use your gifts to win the tournament before it begins, and in doing so save Krakoa.
It's a mission of betrayal that breaks every rule set forth by Saturnyne, as well as all standards of honor.
Yay! You hear that, Peter? You're going to be a *hero!*
Oooh. Should have let you finish.
If we're found out at any point, it could mean the end of the world.
Cool!
I wish that were all the bad news.
Rockslide's backup was corrupted when he died in Otherworld. Resurrections have been canceled until they figure out what happened.
That means if you die out there you might not come back, and if you do, you won't be the same.
You'll be jazzed to know Empath snuck in under the wire, Greycrow. He'll be joining us.
But Grey-Cow shot him in the head. Boom! I saw it.
Then his body got blown up. And burned too, probably.
How'd they fix him?

Ain't no fixin' that.
GreyCROW by the way.
They put his precious soul in a new body, dear. Like the song I sing you.
Go to sleep, Orphan-Maker, you'll wake to cake and tea...
Feels like we're getting in the weeds here.
I'll save you the song, kid. Empath died, but then another one woke up. They say it's the same one, and no one can tell the difference, so what does it matter?
But Empath is still dead?
From where the Empath I shot is standing, yeah. From where the Empath that's alive is standing, no.
Comes down to whose opinion is more important... a living person who can breathe and talk, or a corpse that can't say $@#% about @#%$.
Oh, the language is a shame.
But those are just my thoughts on the subject.
Thanks for that, John.
No one comes back if we die in Otherworld is the point. We all get that?
Hrm.

Bar Sinister.
One last time. And *listen* because I'm getting tired of talking to *myself.*
We enter through the Avalon gate, gain the favor of King Jamie, pass under the *Starlight Citadel*, trek through Dryador and enter *Arakko.*
And *Arakko* contains The Prize.
Any questions?
I'm still thawing and need to get my bearings, but it seems like a perfectly acceptable use of our time.
All right. Then what are we waiting for?
Oh. I'm sorry.
You have my permission to go.
I--I'M NOT GOING! For what reason do you think you were thawed out in the first place?!
Not for a *SUICIDE MISSION, I JUST GOT HERE!*
If you don't want to be a team player perhaps you should go back to the *ICE!*

Yes, I could do that.
Or I could tell our new friends about the *illegal clone farm* in our *basement!*
You threaten *me* with your trollop's tongue?!
That's it. Get in the incinerator.
NOW.
And waste this young and supple body?! You go, Grandpa!
Do not push me. I will come at you like a tornado of teeth and claw--
I love it. I will go *full primate.* Do me a favor and lightly pepper yourself before *I eat your face.*
Hmmm... Can't say that sounds very fun at all.
The *noble contest,* then?
Don't love it either.
I said the *noble contest,* didn't I?
Best two out of three?
It begins.
Winner keeps the cape.

AVALON

REGENT: **THE MAD MONARCH, KING JAMIE BRADDOCK**

A land of tranquil beauty and fairy forests, Avalon has long stood as a haven for honor, magic and the pursuit of knightly virtue.

Long under the personal protection of the wizard **Merlyn**, the seat of power at Camelot has been largely held by the great King **Arthur Pendragon** and his knights. From the fairy isle of Tír na nÓg to the noble Green Chapel, Avalon is lush and ripe with history and culture. Magic is in the very fabric of Avalon, and the realm is home to many powerful magi and practitioners, and as such, its people have long lived in peace, safety and comfort.

However, Avalon is spiritually and subconsciously tied to the land itself in Earth's own Britain. When Britain thrives, Avalon thrives, and when Avalon is in peril, Britain itself can feel the heat of the flames.

In recent history, the witch **Morgan Le Fay** laid claim to the throne and swore that the King's absence was of his own doing. But no sooner had she claimed the throne than she made war against the Lady **Opal Luna Saturnyne** and the Starlight Citadel.

After a battle lit by dragonfire that threatened the threads of reality, Morgan Le Fay was defeated by the hero **Captain Britain** and her knights. The mutant sorcerer **Apocalypse** challenged her to a trial of champions, and with Morgan's defeat, the throne was ceded to King **Jamie Braddock**, brother to Captain Britain.

Today Avalon sits peaceably under the Monarch's rule. The dark cloud of Morgan Le Fay's reign has lifted, but the Pendragon family has not returned. Avalon remains safely in mutant hands, tied both now to the land of Britain and the land of Krakoa.

Avalon Gate.
I'm back, piggies!
Nothing?
Fine, #@$% you too.
Someone wanna tell me which one of you clowns got me killed last time? I can't remember.
Remember Greycrow's warning not to use your powers to manipulate the team.
That's the important thing to remember.
Hee hee.
Did you--
Did you SHOOT ME IN THE HEAD?!
I did. Do it again and I'll cut you in half.
PLACES! Places, everyone!
I don't have to tell you all about the journey of a million steps. And the miles it involves. And the importance of the first mile of steps.
Or something.
The speech is out of the way. Everyone up to speed? Let's get moving.
You're coming with us?
"Coming with you." Cute way to put it.
No, I'll be leading you into enemy territory.
As your general, jockeying for my affection is encouraged.
Favoritism will be rampant and arbitrary.

Chop-chop! Adventure awaits.
Sir Jamie of Braddock. King of Avalon, we--
DOWN!
DOWN, PRINCESS SILKMANE!
YOU SAID YOU WERE AN EQUESTRIAN, MUFORD! THAT YOU "WERE RAISED AROUND HORSES," MUFORD!
I said no such thing, king!
Oooh, that's a right crackin' *cape* you've got there.

My great king! We have come to beg entrance to the magical kingdom of Avalon, for we have heroic intentions!
Oh. You can't pass, I'm afraid. It wouldn't please the great *Saturnyne.* There would be trouble, and we can't have that.
Or fun either.
Not anymore, apparently.
Ah, but your *fun* is what I seek to preserve!
Your *special, secret* fun.
Hmmmm...
Muford, be a champ and go play with the horse. That's what you're good at.
Or so you claim.
Right tired of hearing that, Muford.
I never said that, your highness. Perhaps you dreamed it?
Now, what were you going on about?
It's been discovered that a mutant who dies in your kingdom does not come back *intact.* I thought that may be important to someone whose predilections have been called *unsafe.*
Where did you...
Someone's been talking out of turn.
MUFORD!
Y-yes, my king?
I just remembered it was *I* who was raised around horses. Not you.
Daft twit.
Yes, my king.
Now...where were we?
I can help you, my king.
Allow us passage into Avalon, and I will allow you one visit to Bar Sinister, where you'll be provided with a black market clone of your choosing.
Good to have another one of you around, yes? In case something goes awry?
I--I suppose such an arrangement would be advantageous.
To my precious subjects whom I adore, of course.

That settles it! To Avalon we go!
What's happening?
Oh! But surely we must seal our bargain with an exchange of gifts!
MUFORD! BRING THE PRINCESS!
I offer you my prized horse. The most beautiful trotter trotting today. The incomparable Princess Silkmane.
What'll ya give me in return?
Zero. Nothing. We don't want her.
Oh, please get the pony, Mr. Essex. Please, please, please!
The answer is *no.* A horse is a major responsibility!
Ah, yes. Responsibilities. What a slog.
I just remembered that I have a ***responsibility*** to report any suspicious travelers to Opal Luna Saturnyne. And your ***responsible*** attitude has inspired me to take that duty responsibly.
Or we could all stop talking about responsibilities like prats and ***exchange some mother-tickling gifts!***
sigh
What do you want?

Slow down, Essex.
You look fine.
I don't want to talk about it!
I usually have a cape. If you're wondering why I look like this.
W-what?
Perhaps there are other horses for sale here. We're drawing too much attention on foot.
Can I have five seconds to think *wardrobe* before you start in on me, *please?*
Inspiring leadership.
Peter! Stop the horse, I want down!
I've got you, Nanny!
We've got a real Humpty Dumpty situation brewing here.
HALT!

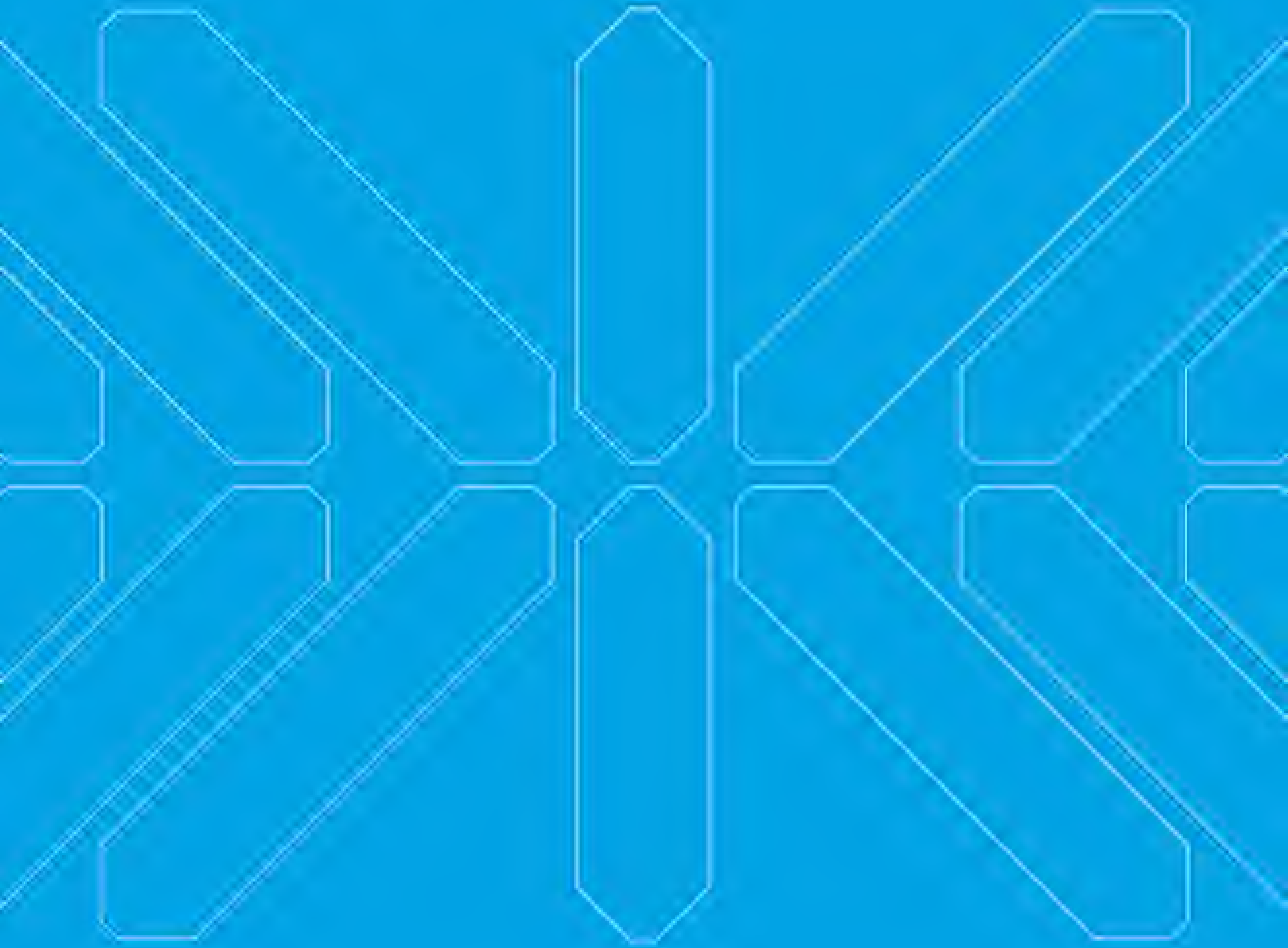
You have transgressed against her luminance, OPAL LUNA SATURNYNE.
All right! Okay! I don't know what you've heard, but we are here on official Krakoan business, operating in accordance with all tournament rules and--
Silence, you sickly *japer*, I'm no *pantaloon*.
Japer?
You stand in possession of stolen property! The blessed steed of our queen herself... violently wrestled from the stables by a naked maniac a fortnight past!
You and your houses will know *death* for this treachery!
The drooling fool-king $@#%#$ me!
No matter...
Manuel, my boy, what say we give these priestesses a nudge in the ol' brain. Make them our allies.
And maybe the one who called me a "japer" cuts his tongue out...

Nah. I'm good.
You're "good"?!
I hate you all, resent being here, and hope you spend the rest of your lives rotting away in...where the #@$% are we, *Narnia* or something?
I hope you all die here and you come back so scrambled the Council cheers when I smother you with a pillow.
I've got to stop, I'm getting turned on.
If Saturnyne finds out we came here to cheat at the game, Krakoa is *disqualified.* That means we lose our island, Earth... everything!
Don't be a *troll.*
Yes. No time for games.
Act now or forfeit your hands.
Haha! Do it. I haven't had to wipe my own ass since my X-gene activated.
Enough of this! On your *thieving knees, cowards!*
Empath, my boy. Surely there's a way to buy your favor? Something you want?
Well...
Anything!
Hmmmm...
I'll do it if I get to make Greycrow my pet.
Cut in half it is.

Enough! On your knees!
Sure. Yes. Whatever...
EMPATH, YOU HAVE A DEAL!
Stand still so I can get a clean--
--look at those eyes. They sparkle like the stars.
You... you are one radiant soul.
You can do better than that.
I won't stop trying 'til I do.
Ah, what came over me? I did not recognize your beautiful spirits! Surely you are on a wonderful quest!
Do you have everything you need for your journey?
We could use a few horses, actually.
Take ours! It is a terrible transgression against my queen, but you seem like a solid crew!
You know, I usually wear a cape.
Ooh! I bet that looks great!

"Mount up, Hellions! We travel toward destiny!"
Run along now. You'll need a head start or you'll hold us up.
Great idea!
MANUEL DE LA ROCHA IS A GENIUS!
Hrmm.
This one's going to end badly.
Don't they all, my dear?
DON'T THEY ALL?!
HAHAHA!

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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BRISSON
REIS

PART 07 OF 22

CHAPTER 07

Krakoa.
BE-DOOP!

Captain.
Captain.
What's up?
Kind of in the middle of something, Illyana...can this wait?
Not calling for you actually, boss.
This one's for Cable, and the news is...not so great.
You need to get back to Krakoa. Now.
And bring that sword you got from Shinjuku.
It's called the Light of Galador, Illyana.
It's from space.
No one cares what you call it or where you got it...
...just that we have to go to Otherworld and fight for Krakoa.

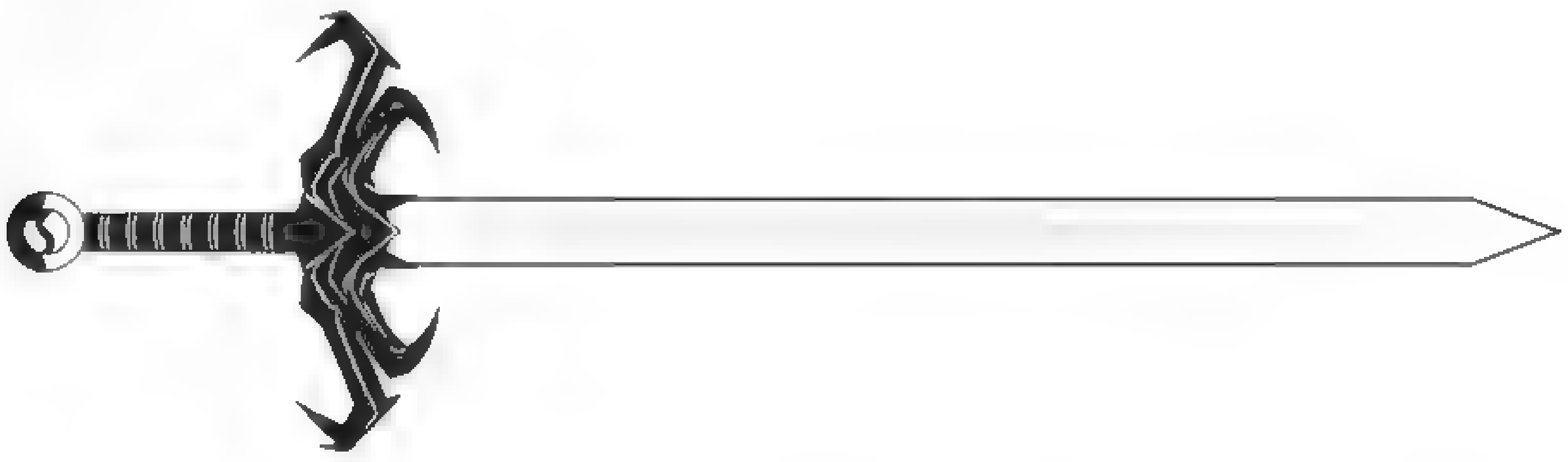
So it's that bad, is it?
Well, you know me...
I'm up for it, but someone's going to lose some sleep over this. No doubt.
Is there a time frame?
Minutes, hours, days... something like that.
All right. We'll be back as quickly as possible.
Maybe we'll make some plans?
Never know. It could always rain.
...
Understood.
BE-DOOP

I'm gonna die.
Dougfriend, Self is not afraid for self.
But self senses Dougfriend worries.
I... no...
I feel like I'm not pulling my weight and this...this tournament, it hasn't even begun.
Everyone else is out, questing for their swords and mine...is...
You.
Which I suppose we're not keeping a secret anymore--*not that we were doing a good job of hiding it...*
But this feels like there's something deeper at play. Some Saturnyne stratagem. I mean, why me? Why *you?*
This is fine, Selffriend. More time for preparation. Maybe Saturnyne understands that it is needed.
Dougfriend and Self will work together.

Self will be your **best** sword.
Self will make sure that no harm comes to Dougfriend.
I will say…
…you do make a **great** sword.
Yes, Dougfriend. We can work as one. Swing and show what Dougfriend and Self can do as one unit.
Nfff.
A little heavy.
Right. Good point.
On the one hand, chopping up trees is good practice. On the other, why would I do that to a friend?
That's a question I ask myself all the time.

First lesson: Make sure you bring a sword to a sword fight.
Got that covered.
Second lesson...
Raise it up.
Ow.
WOOSHHH!
Hey, lady. Easy on the trees.
No.

SCKANGG!
THWOK!
ARGHH!
OW
So. Ten swords wielded by the champions of Krakoa fighting for Otherworld to try to prevent them from invading Earth, and the trick is, if you lose--if you die--then because it happens there, you die for real. You get that, right?
Yeah.
Yeah. So I hear that and all I think is... sign me up. What do you hear, Dougie?



SWORD: SOUL SWORD

Weight: Negligible [To user]

Blade Length: Variable [Adaptive]

Material: Manifested Life Force

Place of Origin: Limbo

Maker: Illyana Nikolievna Rasputin

Attributes: Magical focus. Spell casting. Spell breaking. Disruption of ethereal objects and creatures. Artifact of regency. Teleportation. Eldritch gateway. Transformation. Summoning [sword +armor]. Healing/regeneration. Warded against breaking. Incantation of honing.

[See expanded Xavier_files:Soulsword_armor for further observations/uses/adaptations of both the Soul Sword and it's adapted form by user]

The Forging: The Soul Sword was created by Illyana Rasputin when trapped in the realm of Limbo by the hellduke, Belasco. The sword was forged from the energy of her own life force, and the blade is the manifestation of its creator, adapting over time, growing as she did, becoming something sharper and more deadly.

[See expanded Xavier_files:Limbo for a child's history of hell]

Addendum: Over the years, several people have wielded the Soul Sword. It's power, potency, and sovereignty of station have transferred with the weapon, but only in the rightful hands of its creator are the sword's full powers unlocked.

You think I don't know that?
That is not your decision to make!
Excuse me a moment.
Cypher... is there an issue?
No.
This plan of Sinister's... having the Hellions steal the swords from Arakko and putting an end to the tournament and forcing the other side to forfeit.
What if it doesn't work?
There is so much that we don't know about this contest of swords, Cypher.
But if there is a path that leads us away from putting the lives of my children at risk, then it is at least something that we should explore.
Is that what you and Krakoa were arguing about?
If Krakoa has concerns, then we owe it to the island to hear them.

Ah...
Krakoa wanted me to present the idea before the Council of someone else going into this battle in my place.
Krakoa's voice needs always to be heard, Cypher.
We are guests here and should do everything in our power to respect that.
Yes. I know. I know.
And that's what Krakoa is worried about. Without me, Krakoa will have no voice.
But the rules have been set.
I was chosen.
And knowing what we know about the resurrection process, how it's broken...
...I wouldn't want to put any other mutant in that position.
I need to show everyone that I am more than just a translator.
I want to go. To *prove* myself.
While I can understand the desire...
...I would rather that none of my children put their lives on the line.
So, let us hope that Sinister is successful in ending this before it starts.

HOTHIVE

REGENT: **VESPERIDAE, COLONY QUEEN**

What was once the powerful, bustling industrious hive-city of Colony now seethes and thrums with fever under the name **Hothive**, a once-great industrial matriarchy now put to work for its parasitic masters.

The Colony queen who appears as the representative and leader of what is now called Hothive does not mentally seem to be the same individual who originally ascended to that seat, though she has not asked to be called anything else.

Hothive was the domain of the Colony dwellers for many centuries under the simplest rule of governance possible -- entry by outsiders was forbidden. The borders were defended. Those not identifiable as part of the Colony were destroyed.

Colony did not particularly entertain itself with the notion of individuals, instead existing in a kind of *eusociety* with a sisterhood of queens all in equal power over hundreds of smaller hives. Rather than a hierarchy, Colony thrived via specialization -- with each citizen born to fight, breed or lead. None were more specialized than the Colony border guards -- vicious killing machines with multispectral vision, who hunted outsiders with a singular focus, less individual murderers than the blades of a perfect threshing machine.

Perhaps this is why what finally felled the Colony was something so small it could not be seen, not be slain.

The parasite that made Hothive slipped in undetected and hungry, as small things like that always are. An invisible predator as efficient as the Colony itself, the parasite spread like wildfire. It wasn't long until multiple hives were infected and the dead-eyed drones, their bodies animated by the invisible hive-will of the parasite, brought the Colony down. Vesperidae was the last uninfected sister-queen, fighting against her hundred siblings, the parasite's hive mind puppeteering them as one. As the last to be conquered, she demonstrated the strength necessary to continue to rule -- under the parasite's designs.

The Colony had one mind to speak, one mind to desire and a million bodies to act upon it. Now it is the Hothive's mind who speaks and acts with the Colony's million obedient bodies.

Later. Training continues.
CLANK!
WOOOSH!
Don't smile at me. You are clumsy.
Your stance is a *disgrace*, your balance *worse*.
Have you *not* been practicing?
CLANK!
Ha! See, I have been practicing.
Not too bad, right?
SMASH!

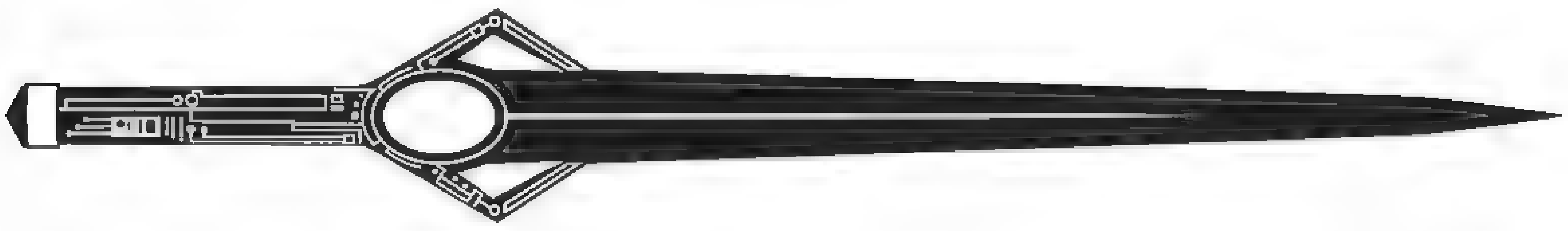
Not too bad? Is that what you're asking m--
Huh?
SHFF
HUMPH!
Unhand me, Krakoa.
Cypher, tell the island to *let me go.*
It is not helping you by interfering. It will not be there to coddle you in battle.
THAK
FWAK
And why would I want the island to protect me when I have you?
Let her go.
I suppose that's enough for today.
You do know...I'm just trying to keep you alive.

You have a funny way of showing it.
Seriously, stop hitting me in the face. This is my moneymaker.
I'd be more worried about your face if I was preparing you for a wedding and not a funeral.
But we're not, are we?
I really wasn't doing that bad.
These are Apocalypse's *children*. And *maybe worse*.
Warriors who could wield a blade before they spoke their first words.
They have lived in nothing but war and violence and death for thousands of years in that dark place.
They almost killed Apocalypse while barely breaking a sweat. Defeated him more easily than we've *ever* been able.
"Not doing that bad" is not nearly good enough!

When the fighting starts, stay close to me.
I'll do what I can.
She thinks I don't know the stakes.
That I don't see how everyone looks at me with pity in their eyes. Like I don't stand a chance.
Still, I'm willing to put my life on the line to save others. That matters, right?
It does...

But I tell you truly, no one will sing songs about it. No one will tell your story...
For it won't be worth telling.
Your skill is language, *not battle.*
At the Quiet Council meeting...Krakoa, it was begging you not to go. Begging you to find a replacement, *another way.*
Were you reading my mind? You know you are not supposed to--
I will do as I please.
Yes, well, it's not Krakoa's choice to make. *I'm going!*
What...?
What are you--
HRRKK!
There may be a... loophole.
In case Sinister's plan fails.
When Sinister's plan fails.

If *you* were *no more.*
Given that resurrections cannot be carried out for some time.
The Council would have no choice but to offer up an alternate. *Me,* perhaps.
That's--*hrk*--that's certainly a plan, but not the--*hrk*--the direction I'd go. Respectfully.
Do you think that you would be a match for me, Warlock? That you would stand a chance?
Self may not be. But Self plus Krakoa are.
Let Dougfriend go.
Now.
Guuuk...
...
Fine.
THWUMP
You have already stated that you are not up to the task.
This is merely a small sacrifice for the greater good. If you want to save mutant lives, this is the only way.
Consider it.
Is Dougfriend harmed?
Perhaps Self should bring Dougfriend to the Healing Gardens?
No...
...I just need to rest.



SWORD: WARLOCK

Weight: 8,500 grams

Blade Length: Variable [Adaptive]

Material: Techno-organic

Place of Origin: Unknown Technarch Node

Maker: The Magus

Attributes: Techno-organic adaptability. Shape-shifting. Self-repair. Regeneration. Material absorption. Environmental subsumption. Environmental adaptability. Directed energy projection. Replicated intellect. Compassion.

The Forging: Born of the Technarch Magus, Warlock is a heretic-organism who defied his Phalanx root programming to escape his home node and become a discrete, independent entity capable of evolving beyond his Technarch creation.

Host: Warlock only recently revealed to Krakoan society that he had been posing as armament for the mutant Cypher, his lifelong friend Douglas Ramsey, who is also the voice of Krakoa.

While it has not been revealed why both Douglas and Warlock were hiding his existence to the Krakoan community, that Warlock would serve as the blade of Cypher is a surprise to no one.

Doug.
Mondo?
Make *what* stop?
Please... make it *stop.*
Krakoa won't leave me alone. You're ignoring it, and so it's trying to use me to--
→DouglasAaronRamsey I do not like communicating this way but am left no option.←
→Exodus was right. There must be a way to send another in your place.←
→You are too important to the continuance of this relationship with mutant-kind...←
→...and as such is true, you cannot leave.←
→But you do not have to die. I can hide you. Put you into exile until this is over.←
→It won't be pleasant, but you will be safe.←

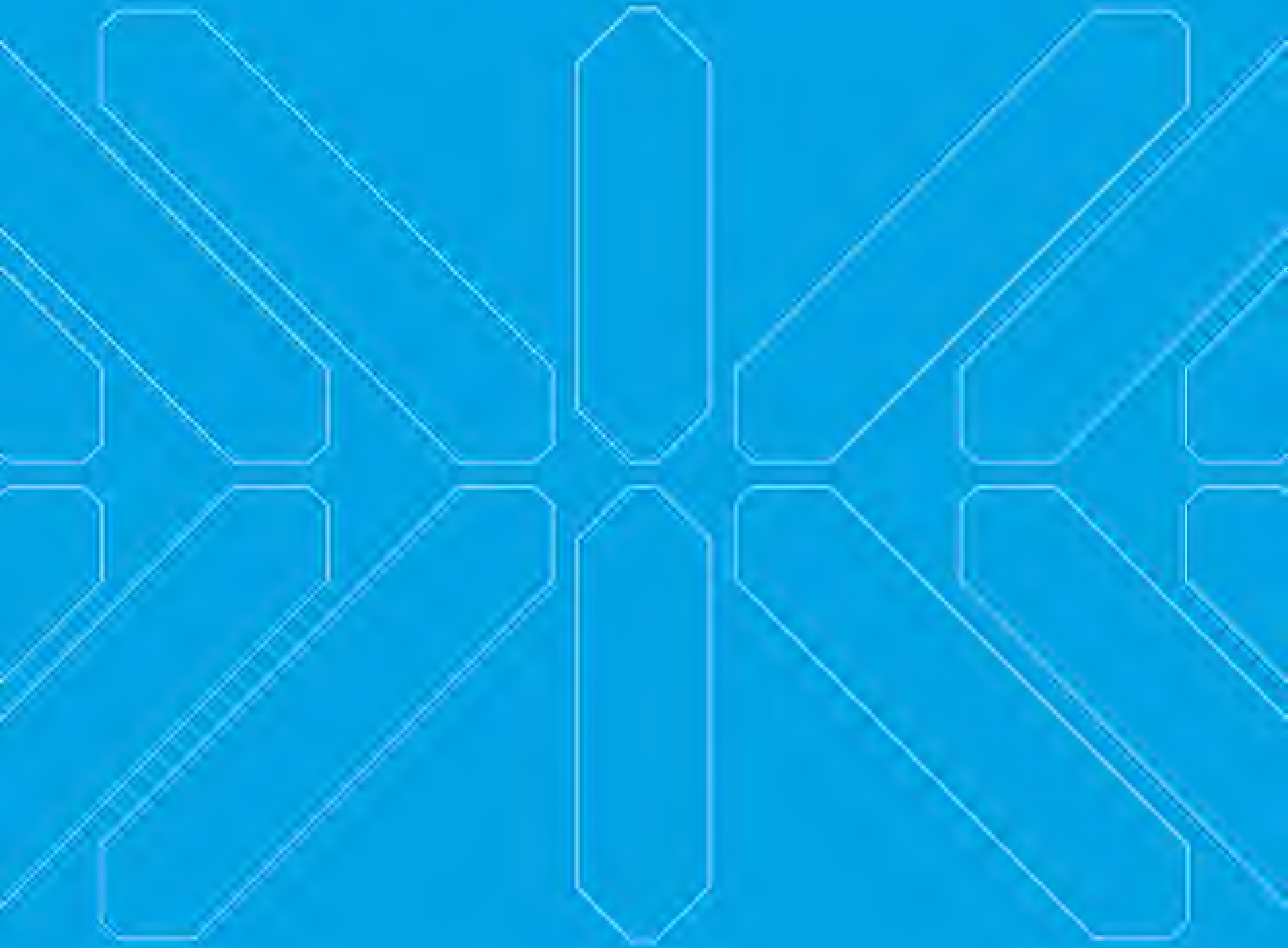
I have to go. I can't run. I can't hide.
I was chosen, and it's just as likely that if I don't go that Saturnyne will not accept a replacement, that our side will instead be short one sword, one contestant.
But even if it were a possibility...I can't send another to die in my place. I wouldn't be able to live with the guilt.
I know that you're afraid for me.
I know that I may not return.
And I am *terrified.*
But you have to let me do this.

"You have to let me go."
Better.
SWOOSH
CLANK!
I'm impressed.
We might make a warrior of you yet.
The way that you move.
Every little twitch and tic is a language in its own right.
Less talk. You need to focus.
After all this practice, I can read your movements like a book, Magik.
Good. Anticipate and react, then.
And what those movements tell me is...

...you're holding back. You're *letting* me win.
Why?
You actually have gotten better.
I'm proud of you.
So...
You think I have a chance?
The truth?
Yeah.
Of course.
We're family, Doug. We always have been.
So believe me when I tell you this...

"If you raise that sword to fight someone on Otherworld...
"It'll be the *last thing* you ever do.
"And there is not a damn thing you can do to *stop it.*"

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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CABLE #05

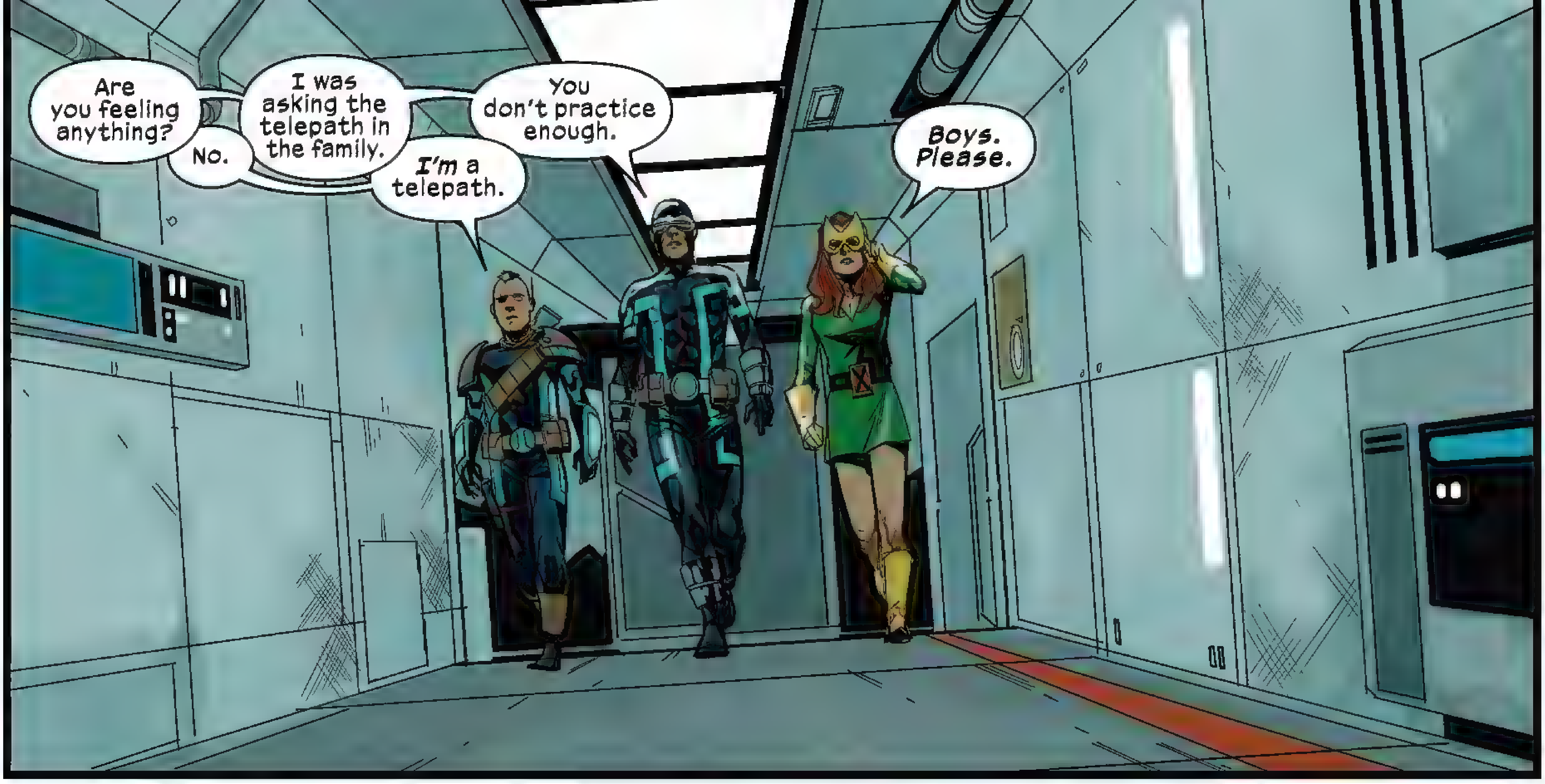
[XOS] [CAB5]

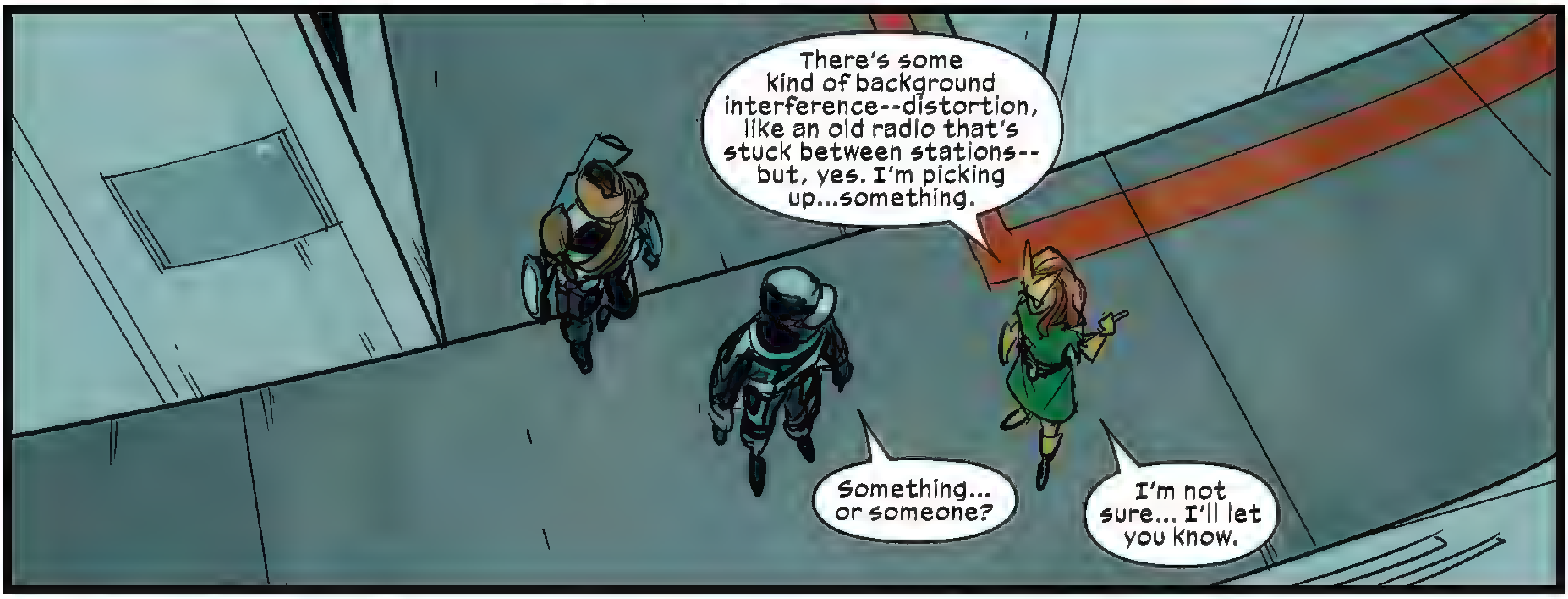
DUGGAN
NOTO

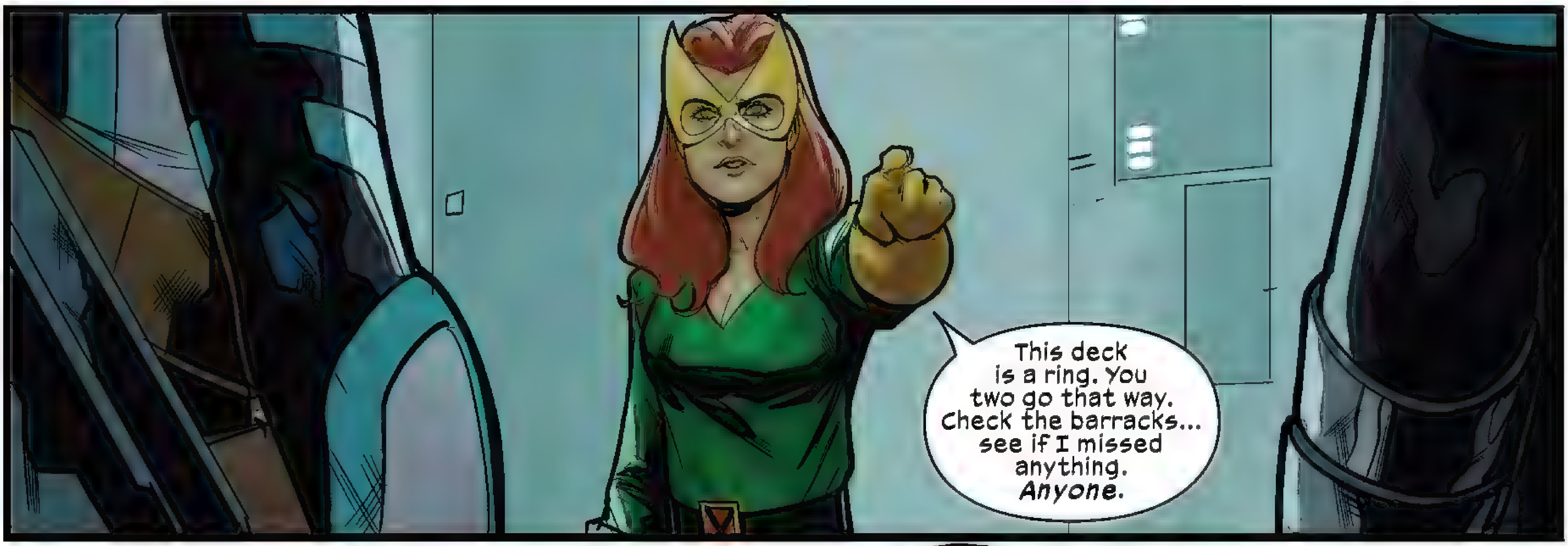
PART 08 OF 22

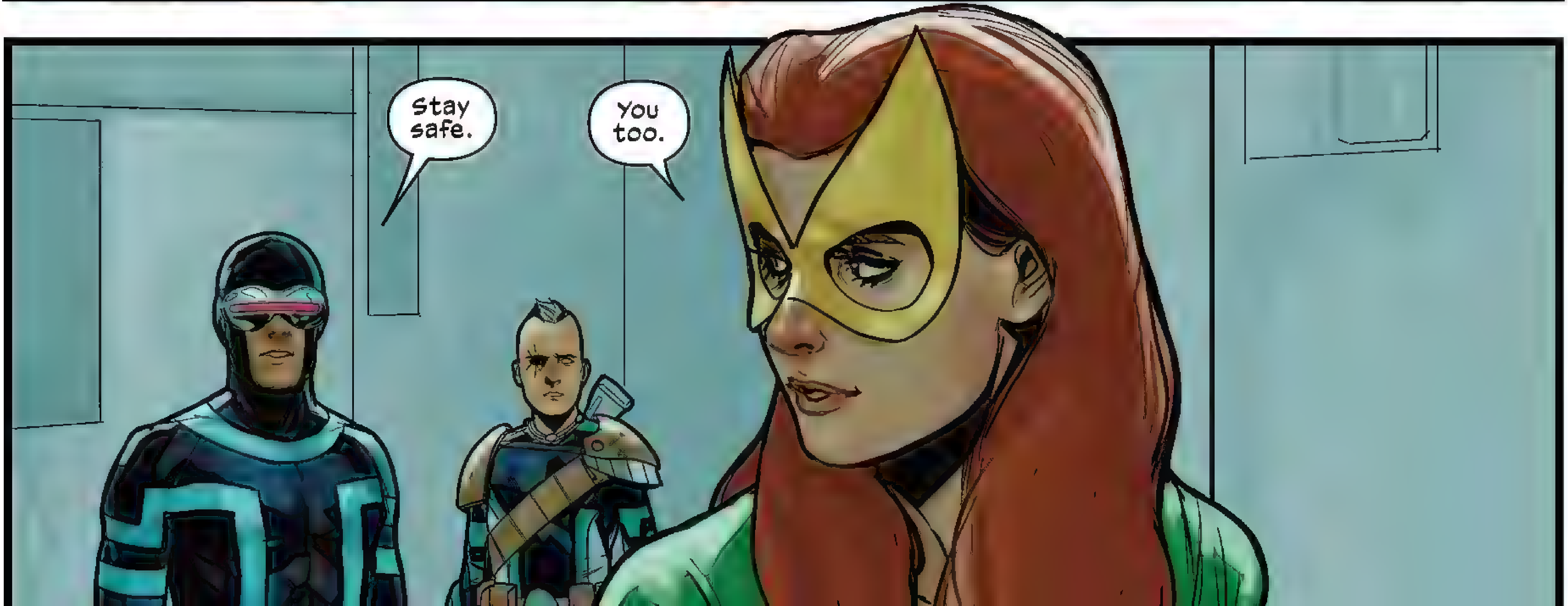
CHAPTER
08

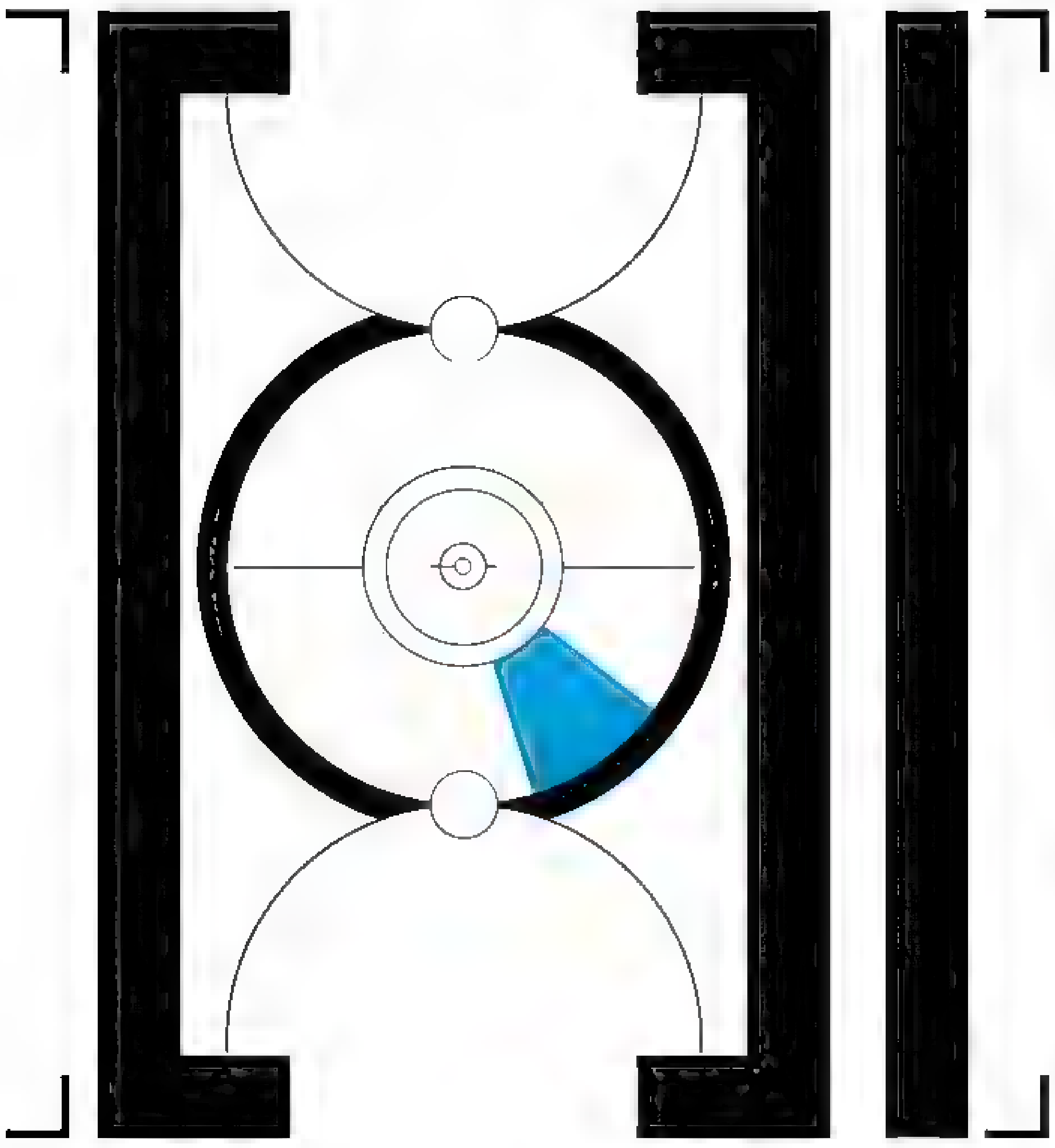
The Peak.
280 miles above Earth.
Your sword did the trick, son. Power is stable and flowing to the rest of the station.
First time I've ever stabbed anything back to life.
You know, maybe I should've asked what that sword could really do before now...
...I was just happy you weren't running around with a gun.
Not to change the subject, but we're on a giant space station that--I'm guessing--holds *thousands* of people...so where is everyone?
I've been wondering that myself.


Are you feeling anything?
No.
I was asking the telepath in the family.
I'm a telepath.
You don't practice enough.
Boys. Please.


There's some kind of background interference--distortion, like an old radio that's stuck between stations--but, yes. I'm picking up...something.
Something... or someone?
I'm not sure... I'll let you know.


This deck is a ring. You two go that way. Check the barracks... see if I missed anything. Anyone.


Stay safe.
You too.



BLIGHTSPOKE

REGENT: **UNKNOWN**

This place is poison. The land itself leeches life, brings death. Turn away and know that nothing here is worth the sacrifice of life. While it *is* true that many things of value lie within, most would not survive the danger long enough to spend their riches.

A celestial graveyard of failed realities, Blightspoke serves a necessary function -- a home for things that are a threat to anywhere else. From half-baked singularities to the shattered bones of gods, Blightspoke teems with the dangerous trash of every reality: irradiated land, castles burned by dragonfire, things with deadly, contagious, infectious half-lives.

Blightspoke is an impenetrable death trap due to the many dangers contained in the collapsed realities. If the dangers of Blightspoke could be mitigated, the Crooked Market would be the immediate beneficiary.

There's only one real face with a name in all of the Blighspoke, and it's not a friendly face. It's said if you see footprints in the dark sand blistering your feet, they belong to Sheriff Giada Whitechapel and her posse. If the enormous mining machines that rip the guts of Blightspoke apart cannot fetch your desire, the Sheriff and her posse can lead you there -- or die trying. Don't try to raise your head across the desert without her -- her long rifle sight can see anything, anywhere in the Blightspoke, and it's likely she can hit it, too.

Despite the threats and legends, Sheriff Giada and her posse are not well known. To most, the Blightspoke is a whirling crater, a burning slice of Otherworld for things so dangerous, they require removal from normal reality. And no one goes there.

Am I crazy or does it look like people's shadows were burned into the bulkhead?
No, you're not crazy. Whatever happened here on the Peak...the agents of S.W.O.R.D. went down swinging.
Hey, Magik. What's up?
I was serious before--there's a clock on this thing. We need you and your sword back on Krakoa now. Where are you?
We're on the S.W.O.R.D. station, and I can't leave right now. My sword is powering the place.
*It's a **sword**, not a spark plug--get back here and be ready to swing it.*
Not everyone who got drafted into this tournament is a warrior...you are--and I need you here.
Magik, Jean and I are with Nathan. We'll proceed home at best pace.
Of course, Captain.
I think I'd rather you not go.
I think you should give me the sword...and let me do what I do.

I don't think it works that way, Dad.
But thanks.
I'm being serious, Nathan.
I know, Dad.
Thanks.
Hrmpt.
This was welded hastily.
How are we better than humankind if we make our children do our fighting too?
I'm already a warrior, and...
What the hell is that?
Jean, we found something in science lab fourteen you should see.

I'll be over shortly.
Give me a moment, Scott...
...I've made my own discovery.
...
Hello.
Are you--
You turned it back on, didn't you?
You powered the station back on.
Why would you do that?
Why wouldn't we do that?
Where is everyone?
At first there was just the sound of it. The rhythm of it. Screams and then silence. Over and over again... repeating...repeating... all in our heads.
Half the station was dead before we could regroup...
Half of them gone, like they never existed...
They were the *lucky* ones...

Death would have been better.
Who...
...who did this to you?
Not who. *What.* They tore through our defenses.
We were *unprepared* for enemies that are not bound to our laws of physics.
After we retook the science lab at great cost, we managed to deploy agents to the other side...but they never came back.
I suspect it's a virus...but the people who could confirm that are all dead now.
Do you... have any idea what you've done?
Show me.

That's one of the first things they taught us here. ***Resistance.***
How to train your mind so it's not a liability...
But you should ***know*** what you've done...
...you should see the mark they leave...
...so take a look.
And now you know.

AIRLOCK ENGAGED
We pledged our lives to defend this world.
No one came for us.
AIRLOCK ENGAGED
NO!
Scott. Are you still in the science lab?

Don't open any doors.
I definitely won't open any... more doors.
It murdered everyone on the station.
Did Saturnyne know we'd find this?
We know.

Was she trying to warn us?
I love the optimism, son...but ask yourself if there's a more likely motivation.
She's hoping...this *kills* us?

Just because you're paranoid doesn't mean they're not out to get you.
It's real. I saw it in his head, but I didn't believe it.
What's on the other side?
A faceless death. Something called...
...the *Vescora.*

Cleanse.
Dissect.
Learn.
How bad am I gonna feel after?
It's a virus.
The Vescora invade and replicate and move on.
Great. Cable, get your gun.

Cleanse.
This reality is already fetid.
The detritus that feasts upon this decaying dimension will be categorized and then cleansed.
Only when death is uniform can our work begin to mine the truth of the past.
Over my dead body.
We've got to kill the power to the station.
Son, you've got to remove your sword from the igniter so we can deactivate the core.
Got it.
This might be our only chance--
--to see where they come from.

My god...

-GASP-
Don't hold back, Scott.
CLEANSE
DISSECT
LEARN
As you wish.

Mom, Dad!
Are you okay?
The station just lurched!
Your father was just mopping up down here...
...but we really need to kill the power now.

I'm here!
Hang on one sec...
Nathan.
Disengaging from the ignition...
...depowering the core...
IT'S OFF!
You guys okay?
Yes. Great job.
Proud of you, son.

[Cable....[008]_.05]
[Five....[001]_05]

TRANSMISSION:

THE PEAK FLIGHT DATA RECORDER

13:31:42 Anomaly detected in Science Lab 14 .

13:32:02 Personal transponders of Science Division terminated.

13:33:22 Hostile boarding protocols initiated.

13:34:44 Fire teams deployed on Search/Rescue.

13:35:51 Fire teams deployment shifted to Recovery.

13:37:16 Attempt to manually depressurize Lab 14 prevented by fail-safe.

13:38:22 MASS CASUALTY EVENT IN PROGRESS
32.4% of the Peak Crew has been terminated in a non-decompression event that began in Science Lab 14.

13:38:59 Safety protocols overridden by Station Command.

13:39:33 GENERAL QUARTERS
54.9% of the Peak Crew has been terminated.

13:40:35 Tactical approved for fire team deployment through the incursion gate.

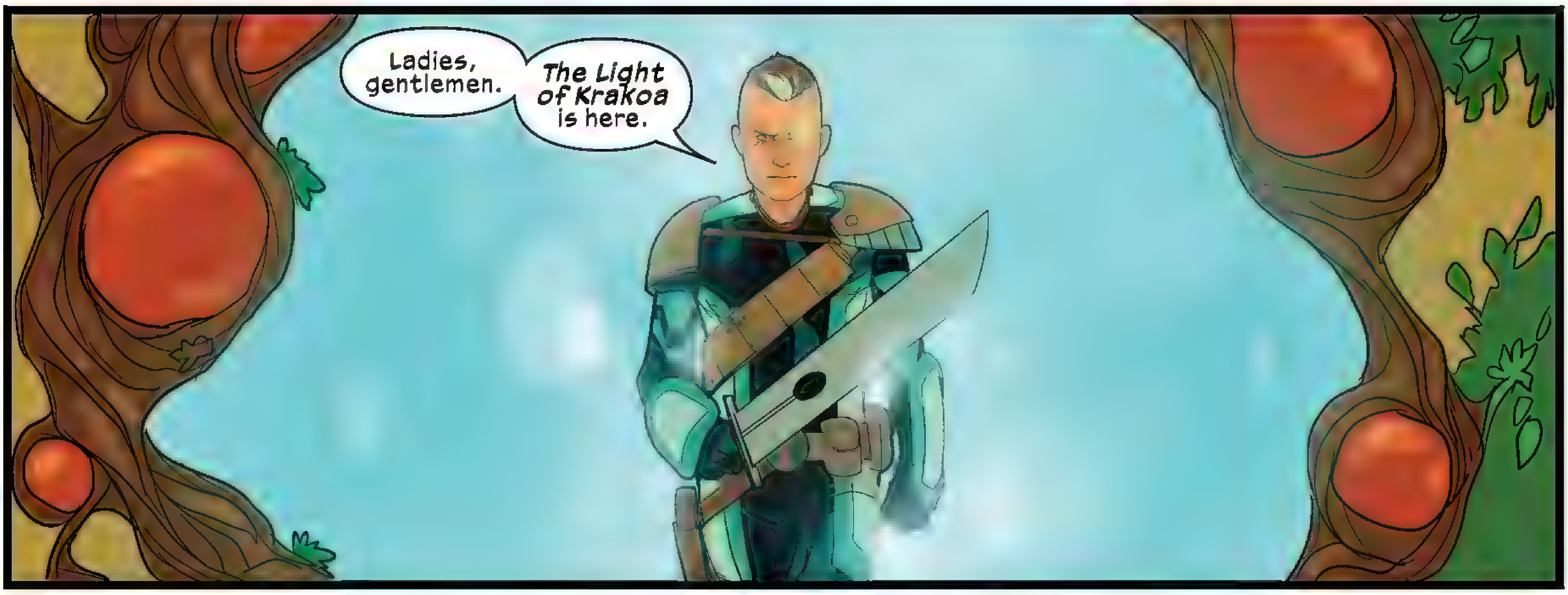
13:40:59 Power draining from core to Lab 14.

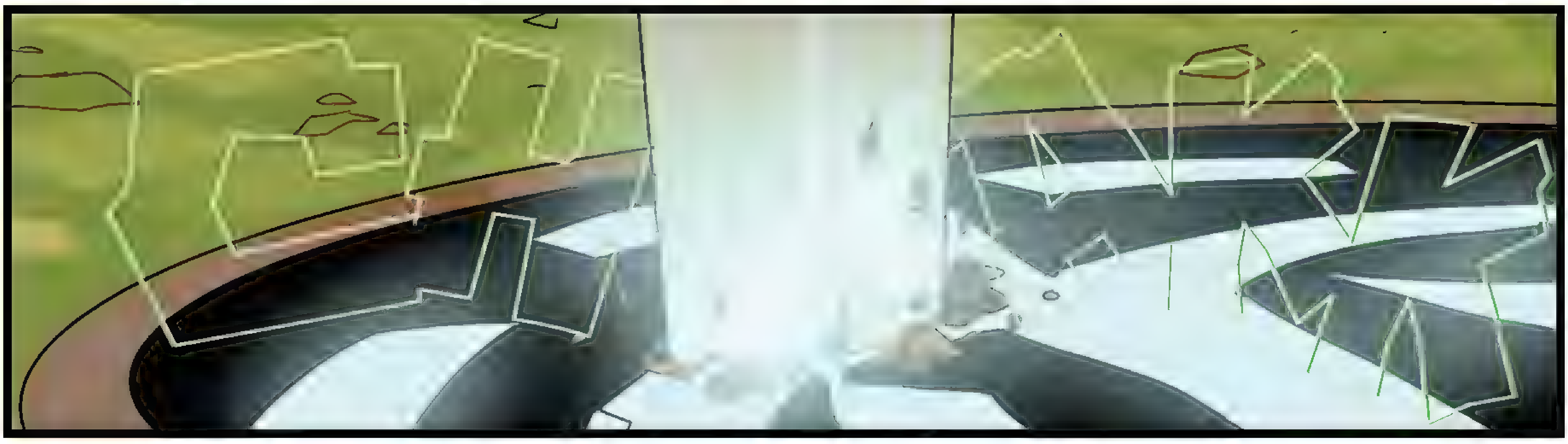
POWER UNSTABLE: COMMS ARRAY, LIFE SUPPORT, AND ORBITAL SYSTEMS COMPROMISED

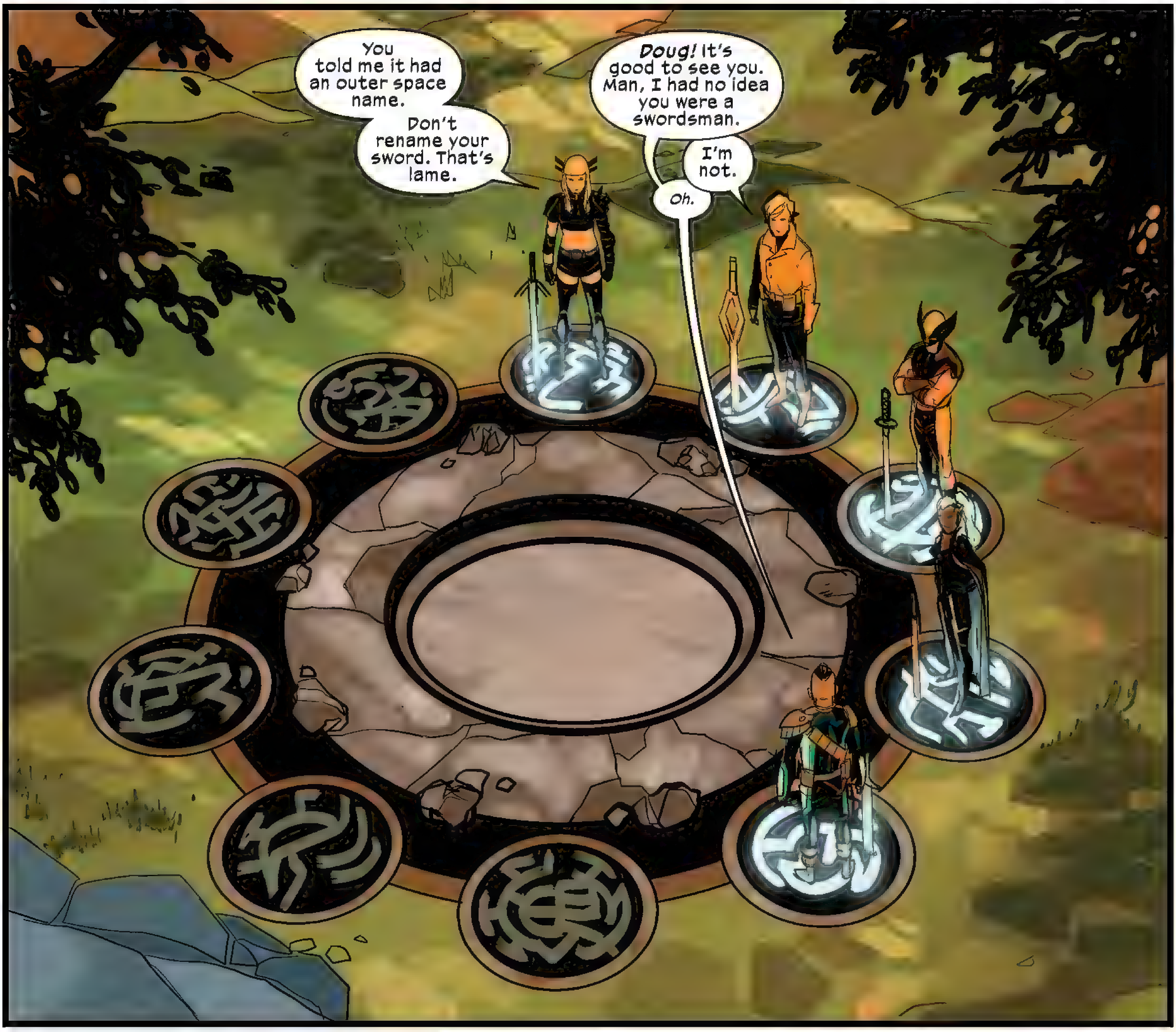
78.1% of the Peak Crew has been terminated.

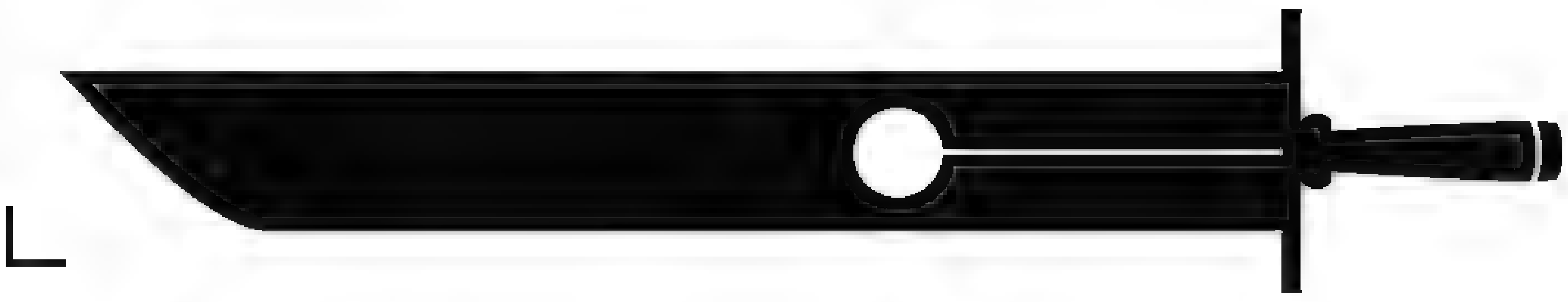
13:41:29 Siege of Lab 14 was unsuccessful. Command mission to dismantle station power successful. Power level: .003%

Comm0110array0110is0110offline.01Distress calls101and101quarantine order are UNSENT.00110101Life Support: Minimal.101UNKNOWN01TIME TO0110FAILURE_INSUFFICIENT DATA101010Orbit: Decaying. Model date/time 10101UNKNOWN TIME TO FAILURE_INSUFFICIENT DATA1010Powe1010


Ladies, gentlemen.
The Light of Krakoa is here.




You told me it had an outer space name.
Don't rename your sword. That's lame.
Doug! It's good to see you. Man, I had no idea you were a swordsman.
I'm not.
Oh.



SWORD: THE LIGHT OF GALADOR

Weight: 999 grams

Blade Length: Variable -- 80 to 100 cm.

Material: Principal metal is Plandanium; however, the sword is also forged with an unknown metal likely from group 6 on the Terran periodic table of elements.

Place of Origin: Unknown; however, presumed to be from Galador.

Maker: Unknown.

Background: The planet Galador was destroyed not long ago by the ancient race known as the Builders, though there is evidence that some elements of Galadorian civilization survived simply because they are a space-traveling species.

The Light Of Galador was discovered by Cable on Earth in the paw of a monster who killed a space knight that landed on Earth long ago. Its discovery triggered a host of Galadorian space knights to attack Cable for control of the sword. The knights sought to use the sword to rebirth Galador on Earth. How they intended to do that was not revealed because Cable nuked them before they could execute that plan and endanger the planet.

The sword either contains or is a conduit to a massive amount of power. Cable is able to use his telekinetic abilities to skim some of the power from the sword and manifest it in lightning and plasma energy bolts.

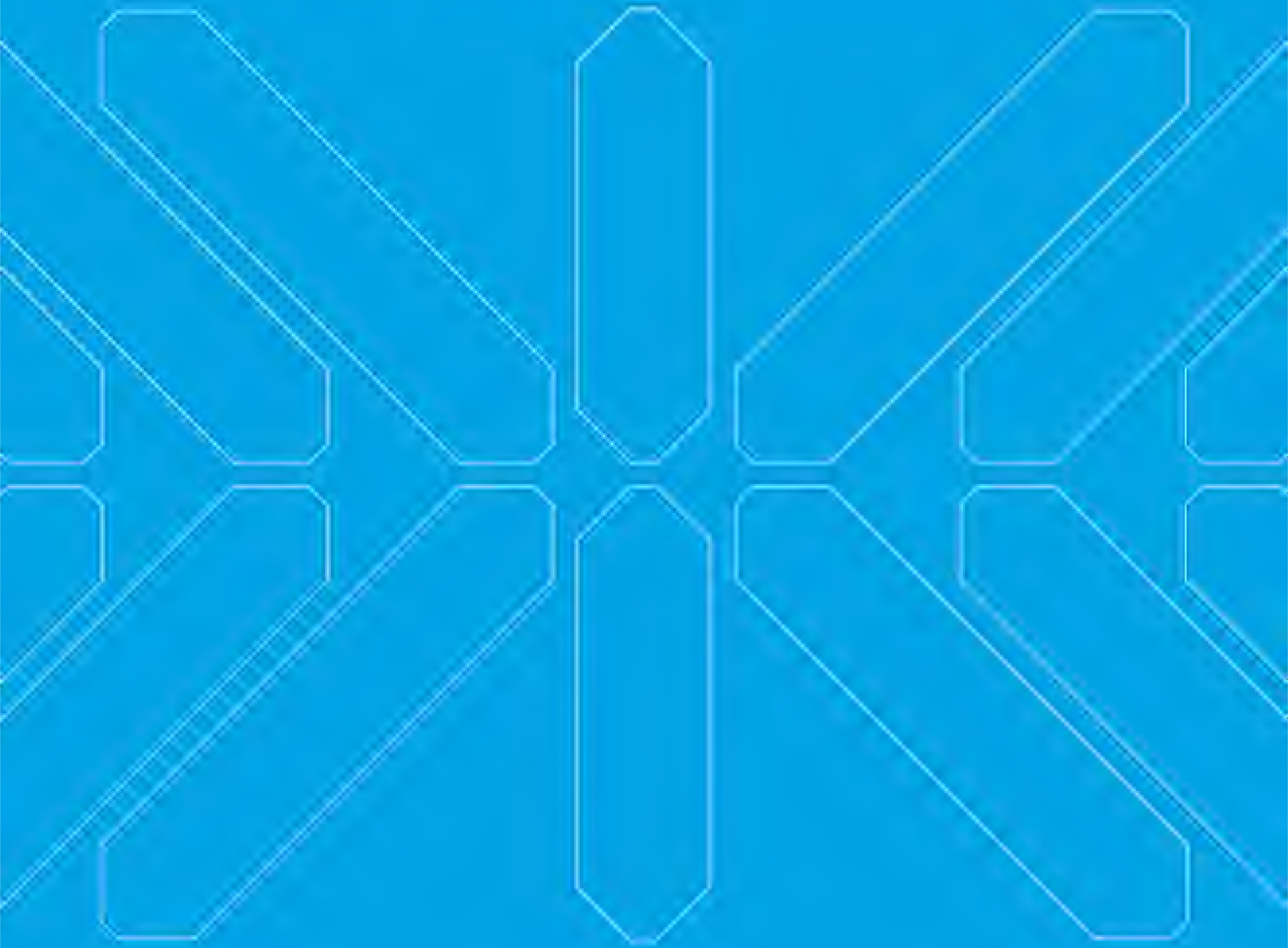
Not only is the sword a conductor for this energy, but it appears to hold a tremendous amount of information. Multiple zettabytes and possibly even yottabytes of information (Cable has not been able to lay the sword down long enough to determine how much data is present in the sword nor what that information contains.)

A weapon of such power should probably not be wielded by an inexperienced warrior, but Cable is unwilling to yield the blade.

So...is it just me, or does it look like rain, captain?
Feels like it's going to come down like daggers, sir.
You got a plan?
I've been noodling on some things. Two main problems...
...communication and transportation.
Well, I have some suggestions for rides, but communication is not my strong suit.
Uh, hi?
Otherworld is locked down telepathically, but I think we could punch our way through if we had enough of us working on it.
Can that be done?
It must be done.

Then I guess, captain, it's in your hands now.
No place I'd rather leave it.
What else do we need?
Can you keep an eye on Nathan?
Happy to.
If you need us, just call--we'll be listening for you.
I'd wish you luck, son, but you won't need it.
Thanks, uh...
Why is everyone smiling?
'Cause we're gonna be okay.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite_______]

EXCALIBUR #13

[XOS] [EX13]

HOWARD
SILVA
WOODARD

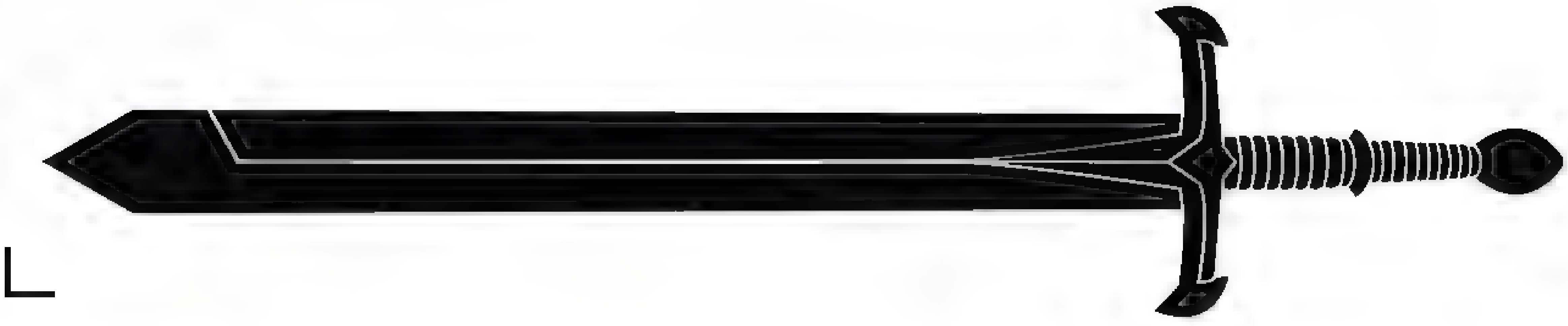
PART 09 OF 22

CHAPTER 09

Priestesses!
To your posts!
Once upon a time, there was a mutant who became a hero to a people who were not her own.
She had hardly settled into her own skin before it was dressed in the colors of a nation.
To be a hero is not a blessing, nor is it a curse.
The Kingdom of Avalon approaches!
Ha ha ha haaaa!
Aaah haaha haa!
Eyes up, King Jamie!
It is a clarity of perspective-- and in that, it can be lonely.
Captain Britain welcomes us to the Starlight Citadel!
All right, come on in and land.
To be everything to everyone is to be very little to yourself.

Are you cross because your brothers didn't bring *you* a griffin?
I'm not *cross*. I'm *busy*.
If you're through faffing about, there are a few nations at stake.
Yours *and* mine.
Come here, serious girl.
Let me have one good hug before everything goes pear-shaped.
What is that on your hip?
I brought it for *you*.
Well, I don't want it! Take it to Krakoa, stick it in the sigil!
The Sword of Might was named in the prophecy, Betsy. As were we.
One of us *has* to wield it.
It's *all yours*, then.
For heaven's sake, can we *talk* about it?
No need. I'll keep the amulet. My sword suits me fine.
Call me when you need a mutant to *walk* you through the gate.

Betsy, I came here to *thank* you, not to *fight* you.
...Do you even hear yourself?
To *thank* me. As if this whole Captain Britain thing was simply a favor to you.
It was.
And when I was too angry and hurt to take the amulet in my hand again, you were there for me.
But I'm *ready* now.
You have to say it.
If you want it, you have to at least be able to bloody *ask me for it.*
What is it you want to take from me?
Captain Britain.
I sent you to *greet* our guests, not to *belittle* them.
Come in, please. I've had tea prepared.
Ah, my Lady Saturnyne!
Are we the first of the provinces to arrive?
Needed an extra morning to *sniff my brother's pillow?*
So it's true what they say, that the *new king* of Avalon is *babbling mad.* What a shame. I know your family so well, I had hoped we could reach some sort of *understanding.*
You can get to know me just as well.
I don't mind if you *sniff my* pillow.
Comport yourself, *King Jamie.*
You are my *guests.* And despite Captain Britain's desire to waste our time, we *are* on a tight schedule.



SWORD: SWORD OF MIGHT

Weight: 1,724 grams

Blade Length: 68 cm.

Material: Unidentified ferrous alloy

Place of Origin: Unknown; however, presumed to be from Galador.

Maker: Unknown.

Secret History: According to the records of the late Dr. James Braddock, the Sword of Might was said by Roma to be “forged in the fires of creation” and “tempered by the power of the universe.” The sword has acted as part of the test to find the new Captain Britain for centuries. Traditionally, candidates are provided the option of the Amulet of Right or the Sword of Might -- those who take the sword are said to fail the test. Brian Braddock, known for his honor and wisdom, famously chose the amulet.

Previous Holders of the Sword: Brian Braddock, Kelsey Leigh, Albion.

Recent History: Following his return from captivity in the castle of Morgan Le Fay, Brian Braddock was approached in a dream by Merlyn and Roma. He was prompted to choose between the amulet and the sword, as he had before, but this time he found himself morally weakened by his time in Le Fay’s grasp and chose the Sword of Might. He awoke holding the blade.

The Sword of Might, upon Brian's drawing it, imbued him with the powers within, which he rejected, asking Excalibur to bury the sword at the Braddock Lighthouse, deep within the English soil.

Long have I known your illustrious family, Braddocks. And now you arrive as the *royal court* of the *Kingdom of Avalon*. How things have changed.
Soon this citadel will be alive with guests, and moments to pay respect to our fallen will be in short supply. So it was important to me to take you all here now.
What *is* this place?
This memorial garden stands in honor of our illustrious Captain Britain Corps, whom we lost when a great incursion destroyed many of our Multiverses.
Since their loss, the Otherworld has lacked a corps of *true* protectors.
Pardon me, your Whyness. But we *have* a Captain Britain Corps.

What? We *do?*
They are *heretical* and have been *dealt with accordingly.*
Heretical? They may have been generated by Jamie's stupid games, but they're still captains. They have rights.
King Jamie.
Tradition dictates that Captain Britain be given the *choice,* the amulet or the sword. The offer is made--by Merlyn, or Roma, once...but no longer.
Any captain who hasn't made the choice is unorthodox and must be declared *rogue*--at which point they are held until I determine them ready to be destroyed.
That's ridiculous. *I* didn't have to make the *choice.*
Your words.
Not mine.
One day, we will have a corps again.
I have seen it.
...I've had about enough of this.
We have until *tomorrow.* There's a whole Starlight Sword we haven't even *begun* to acquire--
The exit is the other way. *Through* the garden, if you please.
Oh, *for heaven's sake...*

"My, what an *unpleasant* beginning to your visit, gentlemen.
"As Captain Britain's brothers, you must be used to this sort of outburst from her.
"She's been worn so thin lately.
"It's *exhausting* her.
"She's not meant for this sort of work, I think.
"The face-front type.
"She's always been more of the *lurking in the shadows* sort, right?
"Not inclined toward *heroics*."
Dammit, Betsy--
CLANK
Stop following me.
If you would just *talk* to me!

You left the scabbard on, but it's a start.
Pick that up and *draw it.*
No.
Did you not see what happened when I drew it before?!
I don't know *who* that hero is or *what* he fights for. I won't draw a weapon in anger for a cause I don't recognize!
And I won't let England turn me against you.
No one's going to *make you* into anything you don't want. Don't be a coward.
You just want your damn job back.
We're running *out of time.* What was the prophecy about the Starlight Sword? "As above, so below. From one womb came two--"
It *is* a job, Betsy. So why do you *want* to be Captain Britain?
Honestly, you live in *another* country...
I never expected you to do this forever.
Did you ever consider that maybe I'd *want* to?
Pick up that *sword,* Brian.
Not to fight *you!*
SSSLASHH!
Pick it up!
Have you gone bloody *feral* on that island?!

You want to fight, Betsy?
Stop talking!
Is this how you want to settle this?
Like some *skinned-knee* little tomboy *still?* Scrapping in the garden?
WHOOSH
Shut your mouth.
You have *no idea* what this means to me.
It is an *honor,* not a *birthright,* Brian. You are *owed* nothing!
Neither are you, Betsy!
Least of all this!
WHAP
Aaah!
There you are!
Oh *dear.* Please don't *sit* on the roses, Captain Britain.
You really ought to know better by now.
Brian? Will things be cordial between you two by supper?
I believe so, my lady.

CREAK
Whozzat?
Mmf, izzat you Saturnyne?
Come to tuck me in?
Oh noooo.
Jamie Braddock the Mad, King of Avalon...
The Captain Britain Corps sentences you to die.
AAAAAAAAAAAAH!

CAPTAIN BRITAIN CORPS

The Captain Britain Corps was an interversal team of defenders protecting Great Britain, the Otherworld and all reality from threats, interior and exterior.

As the British Isles are the place where the Otherworld touches Earth, the representative and defender of that land and, indeed, that diplomatic alliance, has long been called **Captain Britain.*** First assembled by the wizard Merlyn, most of these individuals were simply their reality's version of Brian Braddock, son of Sir James Braddock, great ally of the Otherworld.

As with every Captain Britain legend, the story is the same -- Merlyn appears, offering a choice to the anointed -- the Amulet of Right, or the Sword of Might. A choice of the amulet is said to show purity of heart and strength of reason, the qualities needed to defend the Otherworld. A choice of the Sword of Might is seen as a failed test, as it belies a soul tainted with anger.

In realities where Brian Braddock was unfit or otherwise indisposed, the choice has been offered to others, with varying degrees of success.

The Captain Britain Corps have been at different times guided by the likes of the wizard **Merlyn**, his daughter **Roma** or **Lady Saturnyne** herself. What is eternally unchanging is what they protect and defend -- the endless doorways to the Omniverse housed inside the Starlight Citadel.

The Corps was known to gather at the citadel for two occasions -- justice or defense. When one of the Captain Britain Corps wronged their brothers or sisters, they would be brought before their peers and judged with the reason and compassion that the Corps embodies and penalized as their peers saw fit.

It was at defense that the Corps finally failed, making their last stand in the great incursions that destroyed nearly all of their home realities. To save Brian Braddock, the Lady Opal Luna Saturnyne cast him out of the citadel and back into his home reality. The Ivory Kings rode hard, shattering the Corps' strong formation and leaving much of reality undefended.

As a result, Saturnyne closed the Citadel to anyone but herself and her priestesses, who now defend the Starlight Citadel in place of the defunct Captain Britain Corps.

* **Captain Britain** is the standard title in our reality, but cultural shifts along various timelines have resulted in various sobriquets, such as Captain UK, Hauptmann Englande, or Captain Albion.

WHACK!
She had fought for *so long* that even amongst the flowers, she sought sword against stone.
But to build a garden in a graveyard is to wish for something new to grow there.
Hehh... heh...
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAGH! GUARDS!
Jamie!
I heard him.
Came from the south hall.
Prepare for the worst.
I need a *weapon--*
I *thought* about that--
Here, take *this* one.
Dammit, Betsy...
WHAP
I don't need it.

Oh my god.
They got out.
Real shame about that!
Because now I've got to *kill them all!*
Is *this* the Captain Britain Corps you mentioned?
They aren't even British...
Jamie, *put them down.*
I am already halfway prepared to *make you put them down.*
Don't you try that on me. I'll *put* you up here *with* them--*don't think I won't.*
Jamie--
A thought--if I *kill* them, Saturnyne'll probably *reward* me. Maybe with a whole extra *province*. Maybe with a kiss.
Sure, I'm no *Brian*, but a Braddock's a Braddock.
Let's say I split the difference and just kill *one.*
SPLUTCH
JUBILEE!

Had to even the odds.
You understand.
You killed her!
Death to Mad King Jamie!
You monumental ass. You didn't have to do that, and now they're furious.
Please, I prefer royal pain.
What'sat, mon amie?
You runnin'? Tha's a shame!
Brian, you're going to need to get a sword that can actually cut people soon!
I will not draw the Sword of Might in anger!
Hee hee, to the grand foyer!
I hate to hit a man in the back!
Jamie! Look out!
ZZTT
Ahh--it's burning the scabbard!
Brian, don't let go!

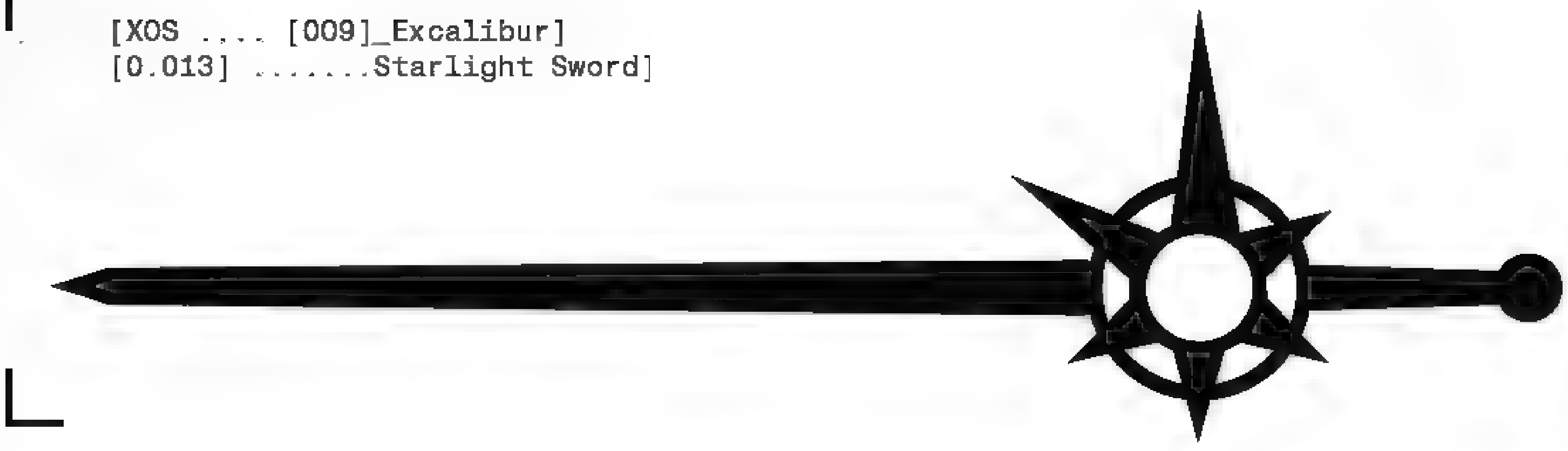
Stand back.
I draw the Sword of Might in defense of the family Braddock and the life of my brother, King Jamie of Avalon.
I am--
Mine!
All mine! I'm going to call you Captain Avalon.
Then Captain Avalon I shall be.
And as it has been my displeasure to cut down a Captain Britain before, I would ask it not have to happen again.
Brian?
This is heresy. Put that ridiculous old Sword of Might down and take these fraudulent captains to the prison cells for me?
You can only hold them if you intend to give them a trial. That's how the corps used to handle it, right, Brian?
You'll get your own cell among the other rogue captains, and I'll be taking this.
I think we've all seen quite enough of Betsy Braddock.
If you want this when I'm done with it, you'll fall in line, Brian.
Saturnyne, please!
I don't need it!

And neither does Brian.
What do you think you're doing?
TSHHHHH
The Amulet of Right!
How dare you?!
I don't buy into *much* of ·-ịṅị-·'s sorcery.
But there is one very *powerful* magical law I have come to rely on: the power of a psychic's raw *will*.
Without an amulet, you'll have to rely on one of us *rejects*.
I will do no *such thing*, you insolent little b
Aah!
GRAB
You have *no idea* what kind of mistake you've just made.
But you and the rest of these *counterfeits* will have all night in the Tenebrous Cells to consider it before you *die* at *dawn*.
King Jamie-- I encourage you to retire to your chambers.
Brian, my dear? Will you escort me to *mine?*
Excellent.
Wise choice. Smart boy.
Don't *worry* about her anymore. *Guards?*

Before, she might have drawn a knife. Twisted their minds, and sneaked away.
But she had become a *hero* since those days.
So she had to *lead.*
Okay.
One last try. Then...I'm not sure *what* I do.
Captains--can you hear me? Please tell me you were *actually* put into cells and not just cast out a window?
Whether or not she was *ready,* it was time.
Oui.
Gambit!
You're... Are you on this floor? Are you nearby? Are the others with you?
They are.
I'll come to you. I'll find a way.
Non--don't try! Once you get out it's a spell--nothin' but black up and down. Rogue tried to fly out in it--got *real* cold.
Real lost. She can't get warm now.
Stay put.
She can't just cage you up like this. You deserve a proper trial in front of the corps, even if that's just us.

Jus' hurry up and come back for us, okay, *captaine?*
I'll do my best, captain.
Who the hell--
Hello, luv. It's the king.
Jump out that window into the blackness for me?
Jamie. Get out of my head. How are you--
Connection was open. Patched meself in.
...What if I say no?
Then get yourself out of there for all I care. Or die at dawn.
Except if you die here you come back...*all wrong,* yeah?
Yeah.
Worse than *this,* maybe.
pat pat

Oof!
Her *Whyness* thinks I'm *back in my chambers.*
But who could *sleep* at a time like this? Come on. We've got to get in there to rescue Brian.
Where the hell is he?!
Oh...
You *know* where he is...
Brian...
There is much I brought you here to share with you...
And while your *ardor* pleases your lady...
I had planned for this to happen in the morning.
But your sister played *so eagerly* into our hands with her little drama, trashing that silly old amulet.
That's just a relic from back when Merlyn and Roma used them to choose the captain.
But now it's only me here in the citadel.
I don't need a choice. So we don't need that *amulet.*
Now Captain Britain will be *my* knight. The Starlight Citadel itself contains the doorways to every reality. Now you will defend the citadel and all of reality...
...with a blade *forged from its very walls.*



SWORD: STARLIGHT SWORD

Weight: Physical weight: 0 grams; wielding weight: 1724 grams.

Blade Length: 68 cm.

Material: The Starlight Sword was said to be crafted from a piece of the Starlight Citadel itself, the building that houses the countless doorways to each reality. The exact material or alloy is unknown.

Place of Origin: Otherworld.

Secret History: Crafted by Saturnyne, the Starlight Sword was forged to arm Captain Britain in the absence of Merlyn, Roma, and the objects of their test. Made from a chunk of the citadel, the holder of the blade steps into the role of Saturnyne's knight, Otherworld's protector and defender of the Omniverse.

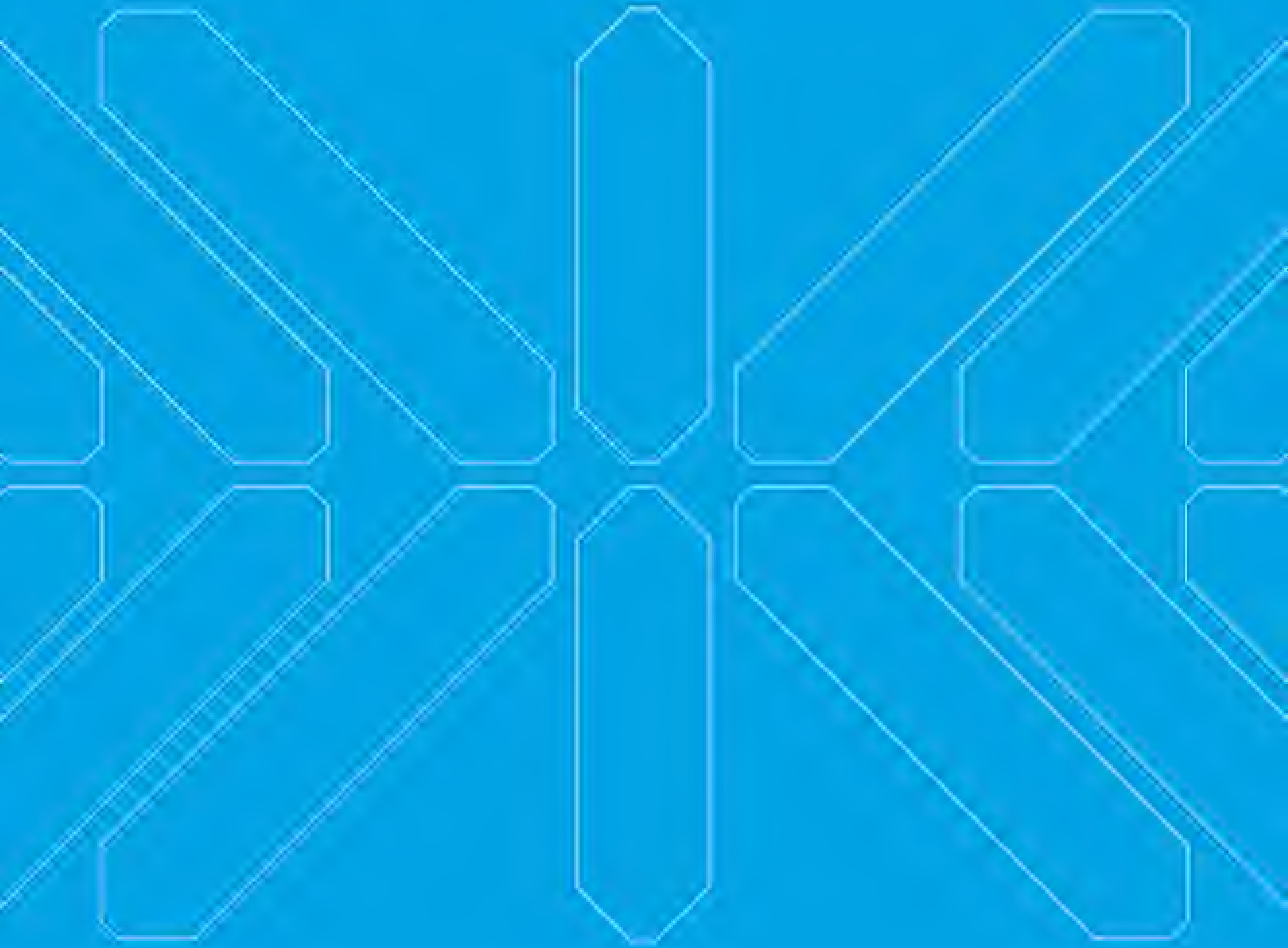
Previous Holders of the Sword: None.

Leave behind the *Sword of Might* and take what is *yours*, Captain Britain.
My lady, I...would love nothing more.
Mmm...
CLANK
Oh...would you look at them!
I'd rather not.
This is absurd. Do we really just *enter* like this?
Is *that* the Starlight Sword? Just *sitting* there?
Looks like.
Want me to pick it up and find out?
I--

Betsy, take it now!
How?!
I wrote those prophecies. This is my game!
You were awfully confident that Brian would fall in line with you when you wrote that prophecy.
But if he didn't, you had an ace in the hole, kept in the one place you would only take Brian--your bedchamber.
"A hero destined to brandish what the earth hath swallowed, and an echo doomed to yearn for what the stars hath forsworn."
You hoped it would tear us apart.
Not that Brian would find his purpose in defending Jamie, and we would choose for ourselves.
And you? Just another betrayer?
I am Captain Avalon, Lady Saturnyne. Humble servant to my family's kingdom.
A role that means more to me now than any you could offer me.
And a married man. But one who is willing to distract you for a cause.
Well played, then.
I look forward to another round.

Krakoa.
Excellent timing back there.
I'm not sure *what* Saturnyne was about to demand of me.
I have a feeling you would have *suffered the humiliation* of it all.
Betsyyyy.
But I applaud you for not succumbing to her charms. With her at the helm of this game, we have *no idea* what we stand to lose.
And in that moment, the hero of the people who were not her own spoke a bardic truth:
For queen and country--
Mine and yours?
Mine and yours.
She would indeed lose more than she had planned for.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



[kra_[0.0]
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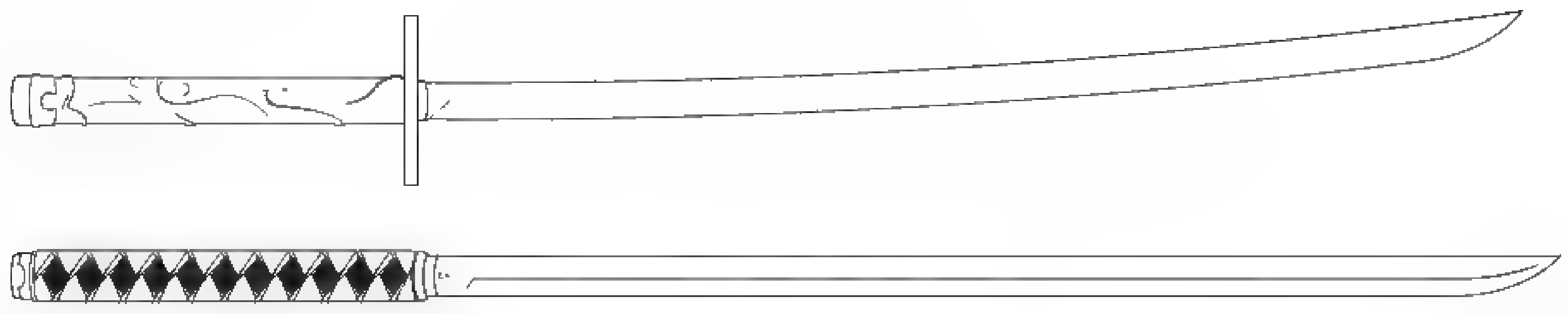
X-MEN #13

[XOS] [X13]

HICKMAN
ASRAR
GHO

PART 10 OF 22

CHAPTER 10



SWORDS: GRASSCUTTER / GODKILLER

Weight: 1,380 grams / 1,400 grams

Blade Length: 71 cm / 72 cm

Material: Unknown

Place of Origin: A Forge of the Gods

Maker: The Immortal Blacksmith with No Name

The Forging: In the war between Greek and Japanese gods, Zeus and Amatsu-Mikaboshi separately asked the Blacksmith with No Name, the God Hammer of the Immortal Forge, to create the perfect weapon for them.

He made two swords. One was perfect, called Grasscutter, the other was flawed, called Godkiller.

History: Gods made these. Man spoiled them. One mutant raised them up.

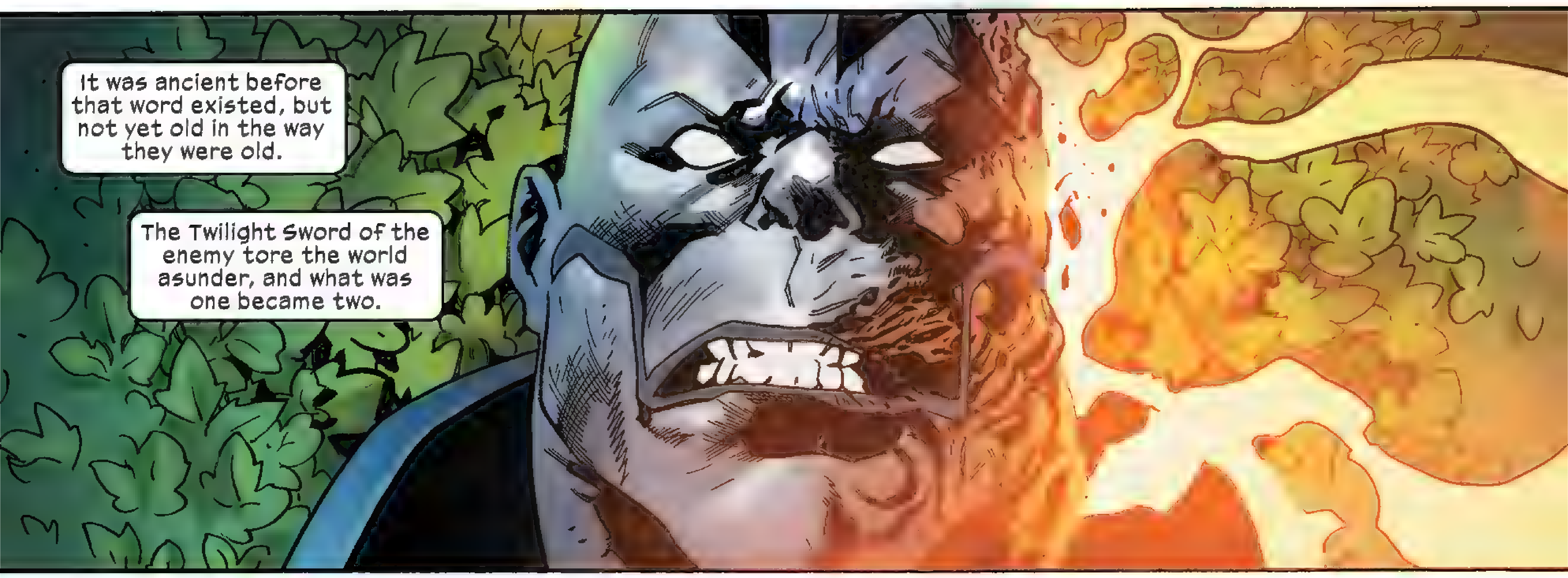
Krakoa.
Some call it home.
Some call it paradise.
Others call it an open grave...
Hrrrnnn.
Where the dead are resurrected...
HRRKK!
...and the dying have nothing to fear.
AARGGHRRKK!

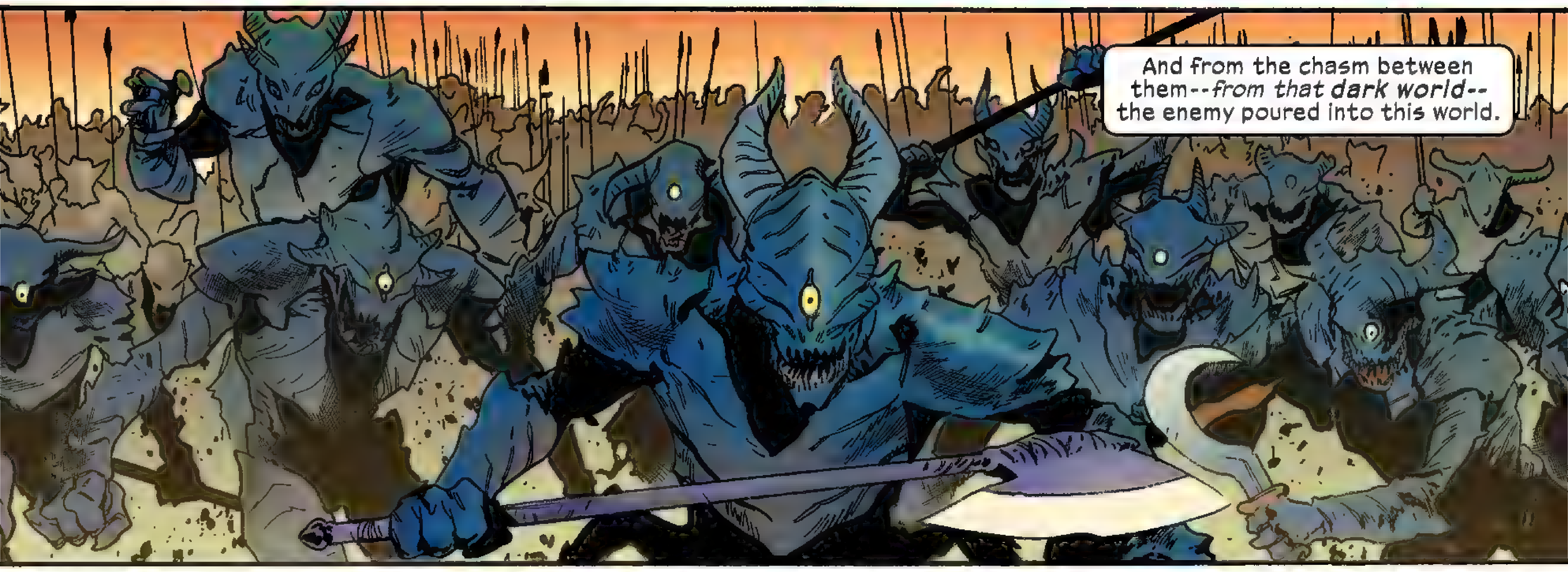
AIEEE-
AARGGHRNNN!
He's out of control!
We can't hold him down!
ARGGHHHHHH
Lorna. If you please.

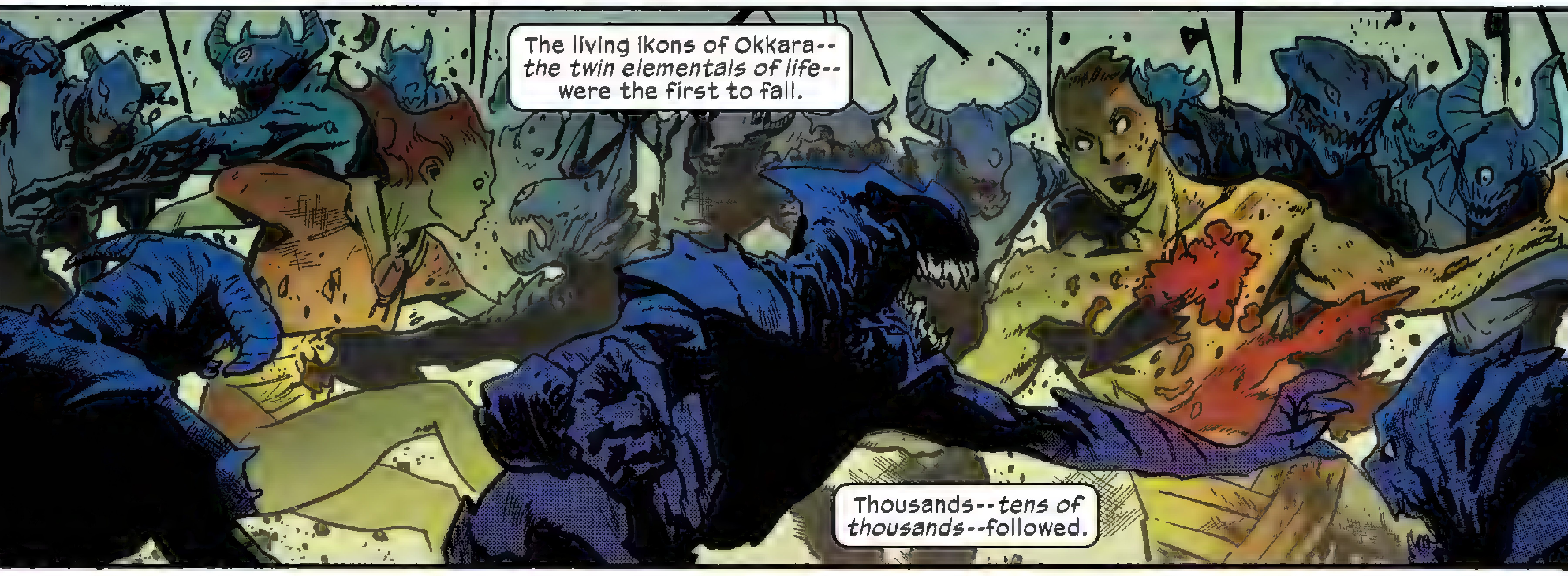
AARGGHHHHHH!
This is for the pain. It'll help...but it *won't last.*
I don't understand what's happening. He's getting worse-- *nothing's working.* We may just need to...accept the situation.
Hope?
We're cooking another Apocalypse egg now, but we're starting everything from scratch. It might take a day...two... maybe longer.
And what about assisting Healer? *Augmenting his powers?*
Sure. I can do that.
That could just as easily *kill him* as *heal him.*
And then we're right back at resurrection... and maybe we will have lost more time.
What are the chances he makes it through?
Better... than yours.
Do it.

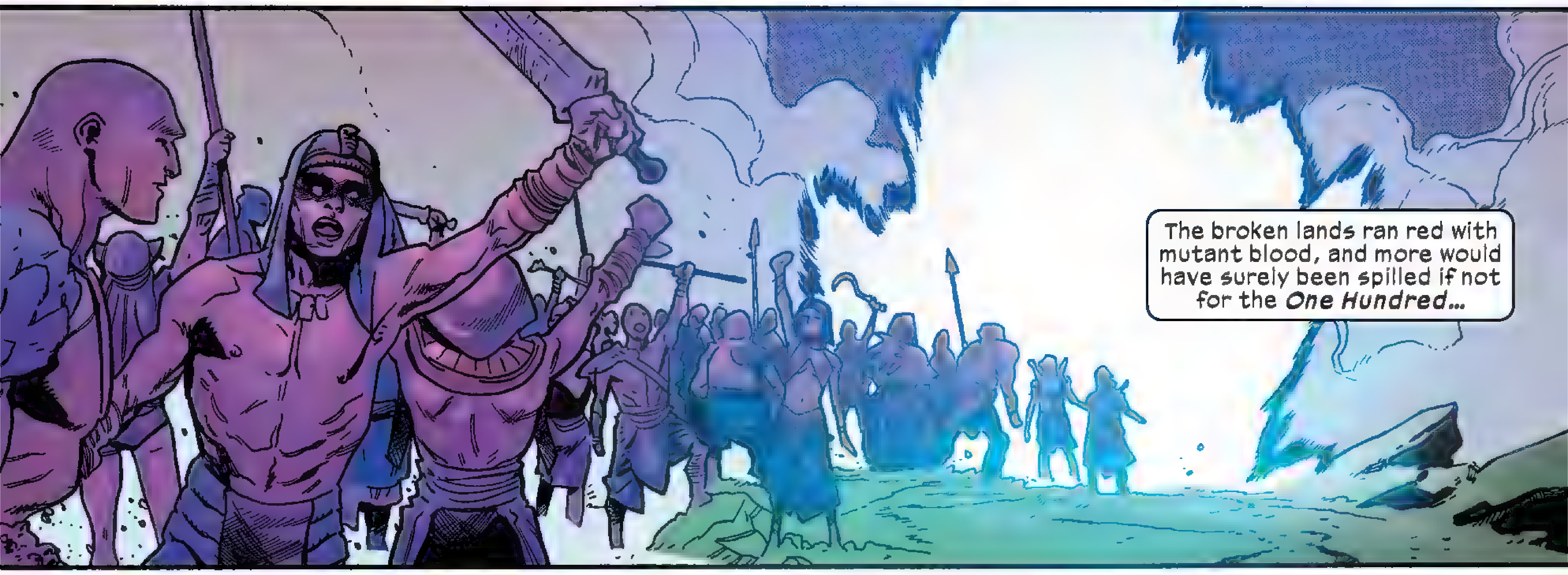
HARGGHHHHH

It was...
He's so *strong.* I can't *hold* him!
We can.
Please... continue, Healer.
AAIIEEEEEEEE!
It was... it was...
What's he saying?
Shhh! Listen.
It was... Okkara.
The one land.


It was ancient before that word existed, but not yet old in the way they were old.
The Twilight Sword of the enemy tore the world asunder, and what was one became two.


And from the chasm between them--*from that dark world*--the enemy poured into this world.


The living ikons of Okkara--*the twin elementals of life*--were the first to fall.
Thousands--*tens of thousands*--followed.


The broken lands ran red with mutant blood, and more would have surely been spilled if not for the ***One Hundred...***

One hundred of our greatest champions took the war to the enemy...
One hundred champions and *their champion--the White Sword.*
I do not know what happened on the other side of that rift, but the horde's numbers dwindled...
And as they became *weak*...we became *strong.*
Let me tell you of the glory of Genesis...
She was stronger than us all. Strong enough to *break them--to turn them back*--to reduce the *enemy...*

...to *peace.*
You split the world--*hurt us*--but we have punished you for it. Now you ask to parley.
Speak if you are going to speak. If not, then you can expect more of the same.
There's no avoiding paying for what you've done.

That's one way of seeing things...
There are others.
Open me.
Hrnnnnn.
Annihilation will walk the land. As all gods made men do.
Put it on.

‹sob!›
UURRHHNNNN!
Now...
Let me see you with true eyes.

...I see.
I see now what all the furor is about. I could read you if I wanted--*even a world away*--which is closer than any one world should be to another...
But there's no need. I know quality when I see it.
Conquest is always best when facing a true test. Who is it that seeks out someone at their weakest?
And in that spirit, I would like to make an offer--*to you strong mutants of great quality.*
So make it.
If only I could simply... *give it to you,* but generosity is nowhere to be found in my nature.
Sincerity, however, is...
...I want you to earn it.
Allow me, my love.
No...

They are mine.
Look here, mutant. I am *Hoork*. A stealer of souls. A paragon of death. I stole the great horn from the mage, D'Juool, and burned the last innocent man in Echk-tel'on alive.
I will test you.
I am *Dal-Damun*. The last preacher of dead religion, the last apostle of a dead maker. I stole the salvation of his believers when I took the head of their false god.
I too will test you.
You call this a test? That's one way of seeing things...
There are others.
EEE!!!!!!!
HAARRGGG!
For I am Genesis.
A mutant mother who finds you wanting.
Now. You were saying something about *having an offer* for us?

What words were whispered in her mind? I do not know.
All I remember is how much more determined she became. How much stronger she seemed...
Until her sister, Isca the Unbeaten, turned.
The idea of a simple end died that day--*there would be no clean victory*--and it broke all of us...
Her most of all.
So it seems our only choice is sacrifice. We know what we have to do... so we simply must do it.
We were born of this land, and this land will save us.

We will seal the breach. Arakko will hold as long as we stand...as long as we breathe.
Watch us, En Sabah Nur. We will show you what a mutant does for their people.
I want to go with you.
And yet, we both know you can't, my love.
You're not *strong* enough.

Stay. Use what time we buy you to make this world into something that can stand against our enemy.
Judge them, my love...
Judge them.
"So that they--*that you*--become what we need.
"See that only the fittest remain."

[the lost]
[:____land]

THE POWER OF
ANNHILATION
+
THE GOLDEN HELM OF AMENTH

Amenth is a black planet of black death. A hellscape of demons and things of a darker origin. A chaos world of wild space that would be completely uncontrollable to the living if not for the golden helm of Annihilation that commands the unconquered horde of Amenth.

The person who wears the helm rules that dark world, but the helm itself rules the wearer. Possessed by some elder god, a primordial force or the spirit of that world made manifest, the helm is seductive -- the helm is all-consuming -- and only a wearer of greater strength and power can hope to live through the experience.

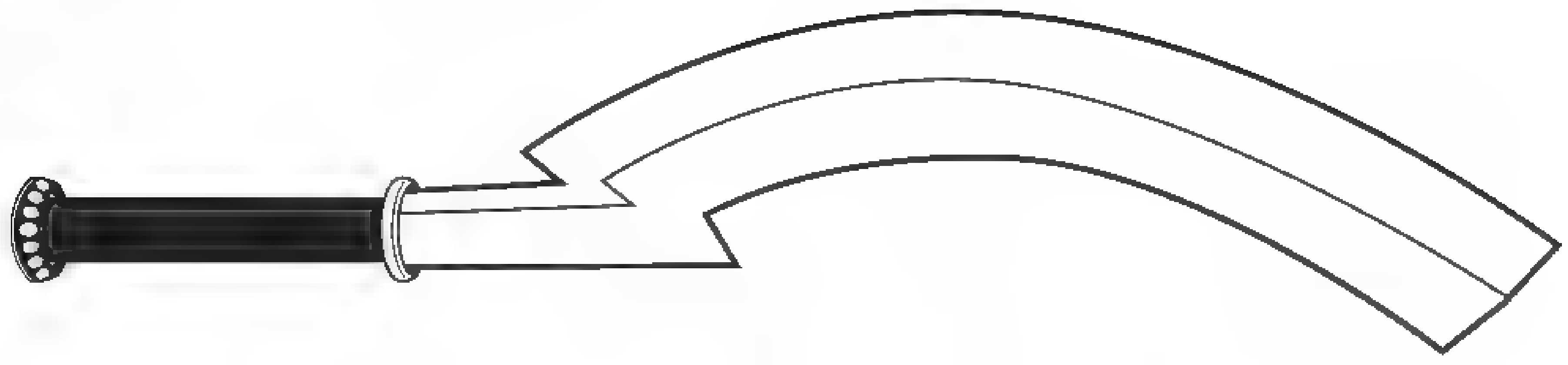
It is a crown for the fit, and only the fit can rule in Amenthi hell.

[x_Amenth_]
[x_Arakko_]

[.... .... X]
[............ X]

[Okkara_]
[is_lost]

Now.
It's... done.
It's done.
He's healed.
He's whole.
...
Far from it.
But I am well enough to travel. I will return shortly.
Where are you going, Apocalypse?
I need my sword.



SWORD: SCARAB

Weight: 680,388 grams

Blade Length: Variable [Adaptive]

Material: Red-Gold Iron of the Old Kings of Atlantis

Place of Origin: Okkara

Maker: Isca the Unbeaten

Attributes: Imbued with External Sadness

The Forging: Crafted in four parts to celebrate the birth of their four children, the Scarab blade was forged by Isca the Unbeaten as a gift for her brother by marriage, Apocalypse.

Made from the melted and recast blades of the vanquished Uhari royal vanguard, the Scarab blade is a sovereign weapon of a broken kingdom, fitting for the Genesis line of Okkara.

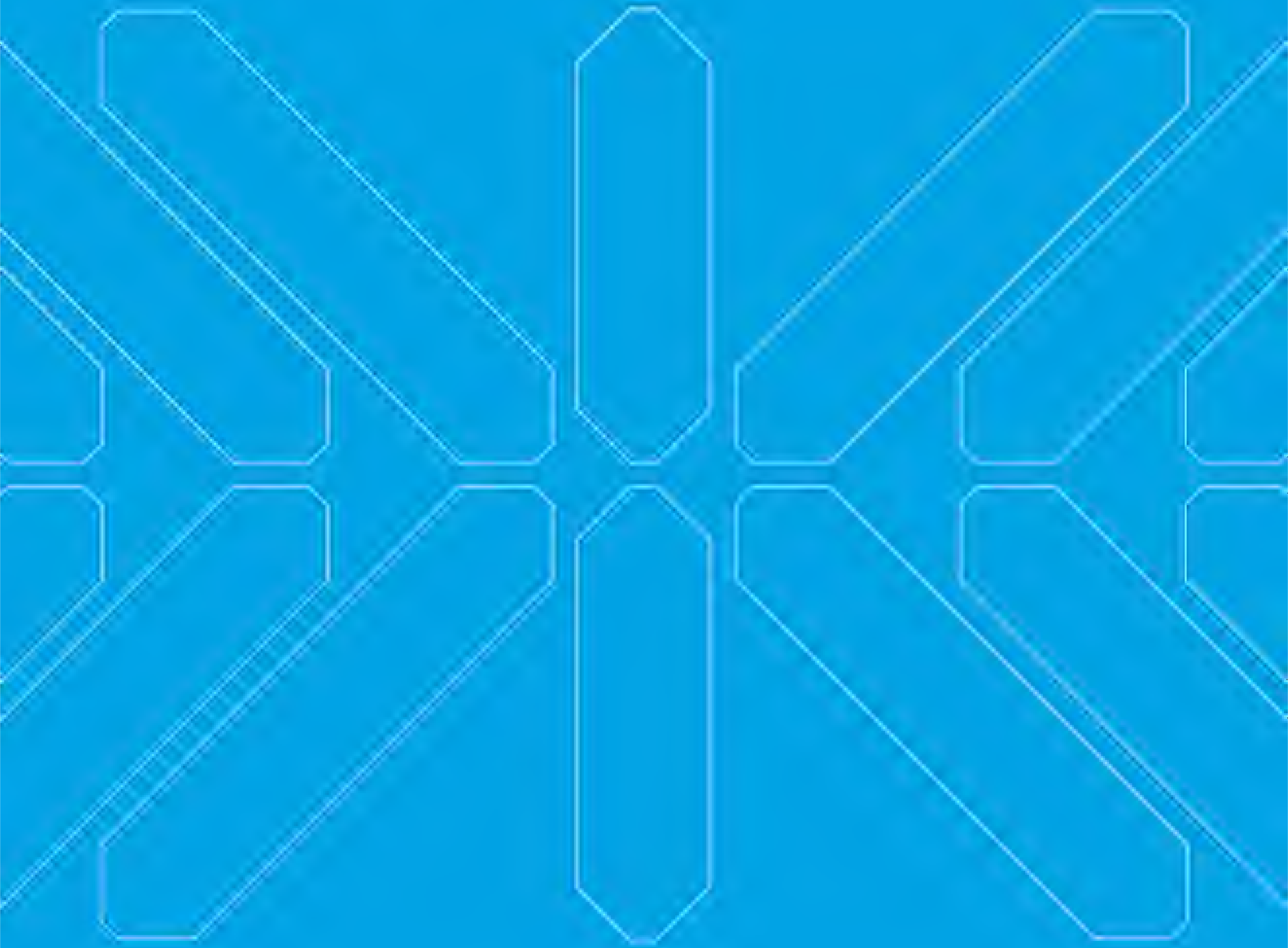
Broken: One thousand years after Arakko was lost to Amenth, Apocalypse broke the blade, buried the past and went forth to judge the world.

Western Egypt.
The Libyan Desert.
The Temple of
the Horsemen.

It's clear. I can smell it on the wind...and even if I couldn't, I would still know.
There's nothing living here.
I remember when pyramids were pyres--the fire kissing heaven and its twin inferno swimming in the night sea...
But now I know this one is a monument to the *living.* **And it angers me.**
Wait here.

Looks like a sharp blade.
It is...
Now watch me as I wield it.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite________]

X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1

[XOS] [XOS-ST1]

HICKMAN
HOWARD
LARRAZ
ASRAR
GRACIA

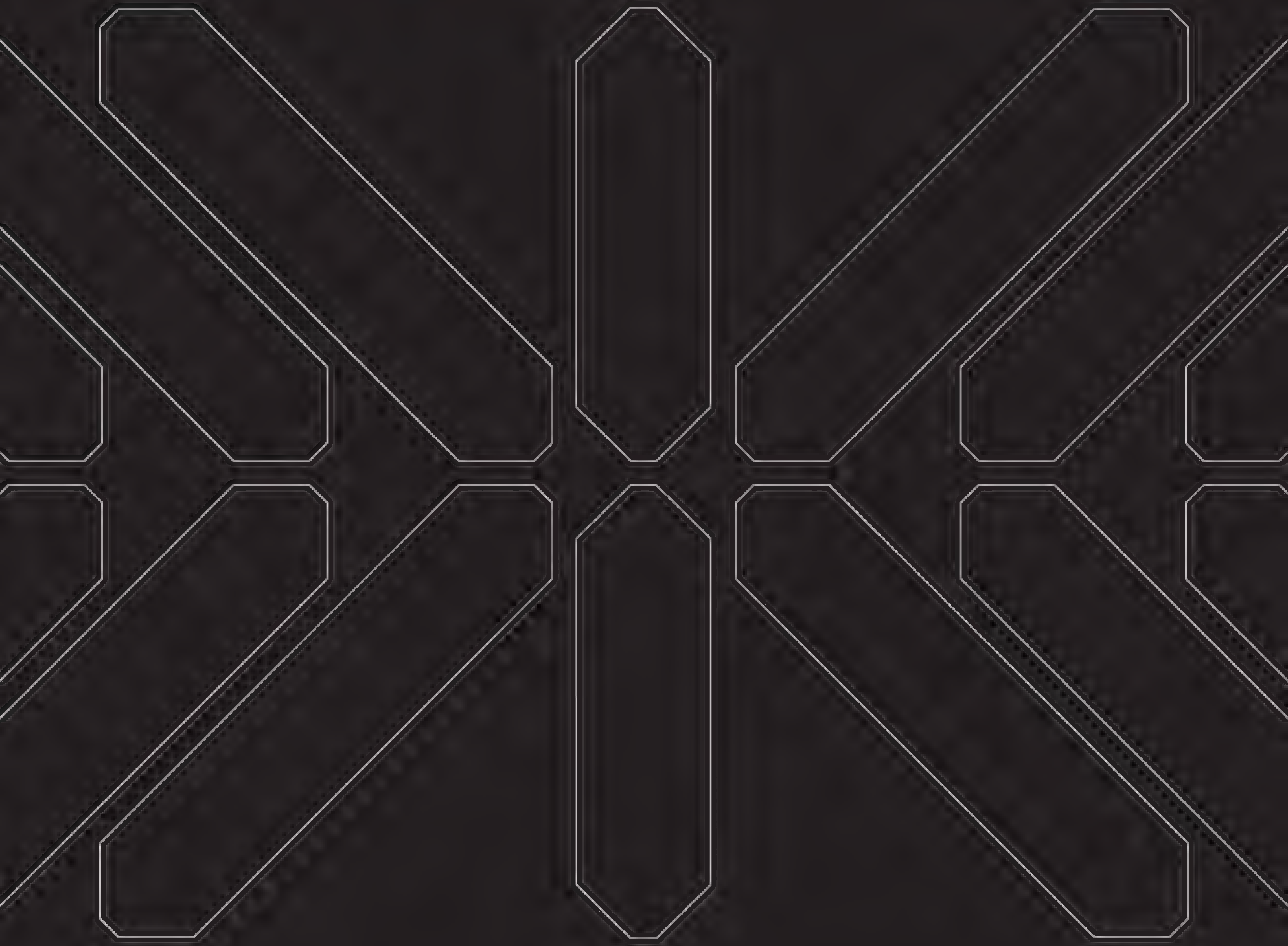
STASIS

PART 11 OF 22

CHAPTER

11

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

[oth_[0.1]
[er__[0.2]

I pull their strings and they *dance*.

The question is: When I cut their strings, *will they still?*

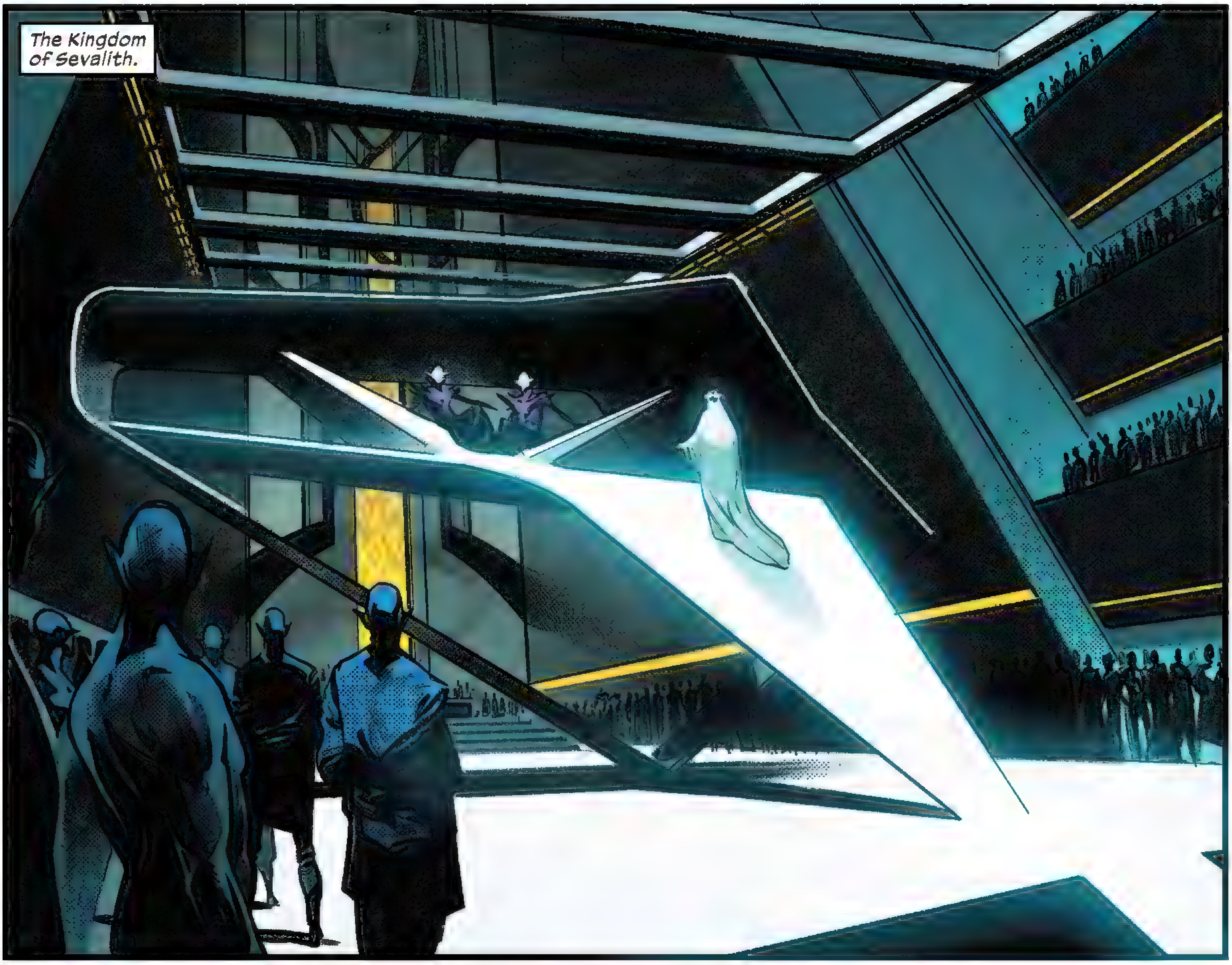
-- SATURNYNE

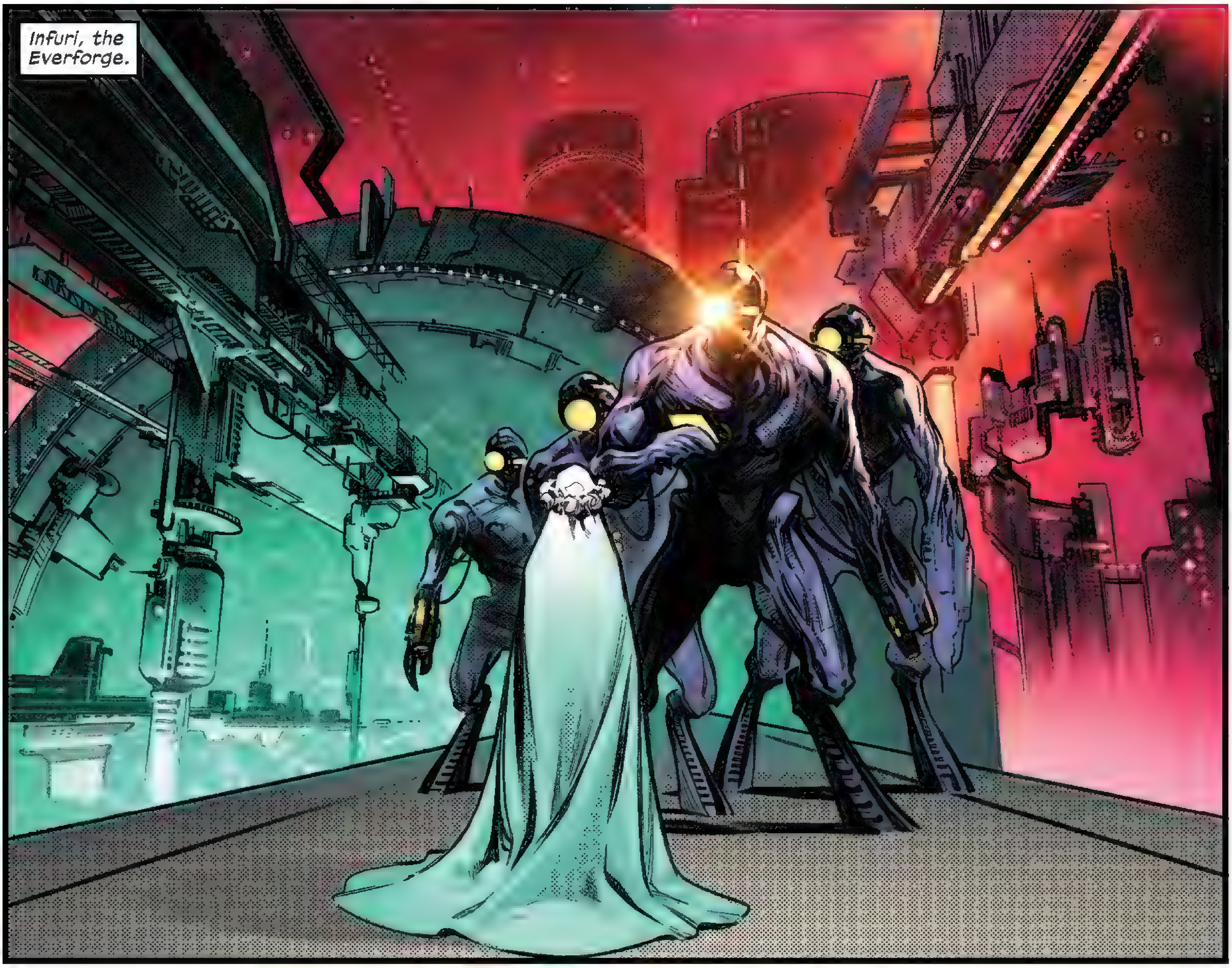
[wor_[3.1]
[ld__[5.1]

[ara_[5.1]....]
[kko_[7.1]....]

[Amenth_sings]

An emissary.
An invitation to a contest of worlds.
The Crooked Market.


The Kingdom of Sevalith.


Infuri, the Everforge.

The Floating Kingdom of Roma Regina.
An invitation to a parliament?
The Holy Republic of Fae.
From Saturnyne?!

TAK!
Thank you, Merlyn and Roma. Your votes--which, of course, are in opposition to one another--have been counted.
Next.
Hothive!
Vesperidae, Colony Queen of Hothive.
I believe that's a nay, my lady.
Thank you, Ryl.
Avalon. How do you cast your vote?
King Jamie Braddock of Avalon.
Avalon votes yea. We've nothing to hide, and we love visitors.
Long as they're polite.
Next, our mysterious representatives from Mercator.
I don't suppose you intend to actually cast a vote this time? Or tell us more about who you are and where you're from, perhaps?
Unnamed representatives of the province recently renamed Mercator.

If you don't have anything to say next parliament, *stay home.*
And tell *Mr. Mercator* he would do well to hurry up and get his province ready for company. The longer he takes to *invite* me, the more *friends* I bring with me when I visit.
TAK!
As to the motion...
The *nays* have it.
Blightspoke's request for open border movement between the provinces is denied at this time.
On to recent business--
Sorry for not speakin' up sooner, ma'am...
...but we ain't interested in a vote. Places like this *Mercator* can't lock us out forever and still claim a seat at the meetin'.
My posse 'n' I'll go in there and take a look around, *permission or not.*
Excuse me?!
Sheriff Giada Whitechapel. Blightspoke.
Is she proposing an *invasion* into one of the territories?
Miss Whitechapel, you are *new* here, but the vote sets a *precedent!* One that allows each province to defend their borders staunchly--
--despite what the brazen assumption of Dryador's seat would have us believe!
Stupid little man.
Your *faerie* blood will *boil with fever* the same as any other!
The Holy Republic of Fae demand justice for the fallen of Dryador!
ORDER!
TSHHHHHH

You there. *Famine* and *Pestilence*, is it?
I have allowed you to haunt that bloody seat in the name of a peaceable council. But now that you disturb these halls, I demand answers.
Do you present yourselves as the conquering leaders of Dryador?
No.
This was Dryador.
But we have killed their childless king and poisoned every drop of their oceans with Dryadori blood.
We have not *killed* *Dryador's* *leaders.*
We have killed *Dryador.*
This seat belongs to *Arakko*... which in turn belongs to *Amenth.* And we claim it *thusly.*
I see. Ryl, please make a note of that.
We will settle this contest between you and Avalon for the right to cross my land. Then, if you are still *standing*, we can see to your behavior.
Have you your swords?
Our ten hungriest fighters wield our ten thirstiest blades, my lady.
And you, Avalon?
They're on their way.
Then *sit* and *watch*, my Courts both Foul and Fair. Let us look in on their ritual now. For dawn rises fast...
...and the champions will soon arrive.

Are you prepared, then? For our ritual?
I have seen so many *rituals* in my day... most of them bore me now.
So many of them call for *blood* or *souls*. Trifling things. If this were another of *those* I would hardly be intrigued enough to answer the call.
To call on *both* of my blades by name? That intrigues me.
As it should.
Are you ready, my countrymen?
Have you said your goodbyes before we proceed?
Yikes, our *goodbyes?*
Can we maybe get a little *pep talk* instead?
Couldn't hurt.
Swordbearers.
Most of you are mutant. You have tasted the sweetness of immortality--an *evolution* of our people.
Now, we step into the Otherworld, where all realities are one, and your defeat will mean the death of Krakoa, the death of this Earth and the death of *you*, as you are now, never to return.

"So when you draw your sword, you must not fight like a *human,* who stands to lose a *few years of toil*--
"--but like a *mutant,* who stands to lose *forever in paradise*. For if you do not...
"...you will not be the first *immortals* I have watched *die.*"

[this .. .]
[blade. .]

THE SWORDBEARERS OF
ARAKKO

[for Okkara]
[for Arakko]

[. . .. .. X]
[. . ... X]

[The one]
[land]

PROPHECIES OF THE SWORDBEARERS OF ARAKKO

A blade of flame, innocents interred; all is fair in love and her.

—

A kiss is a wish pressed into flesh; death is a gift unmade.
Bones wait a lifetime to exist, praying for a cage to be flayed.

—

White devil, white lies, a false front hides black flies
Egg hatches, swarm grows, a hive seeks to colonize.

—

She is the field of battle; she is a meadow of decay.
She is the undergrowth in dark, to stray too close rots life away.

—

A warrior unchallenged welcomes his weakness; for wielding a flaw
has its advantages.

—

From silence beckons blade's sweet hiss,
quiet temptress says nothing and still gets her wish.

—

Pogg Ur-Pogg's Pogg, in Ur-Pogg's Pogg. But Pogg's Ur-Pogg Pogg,
then in Ur-Pogg, Pogg's.

—

A leader betrayed, a healer dismayed.
For the centuries lost, a price will be paid.

—

Grace is a bane, clemency is a boon.
Sure victory is a curse, to pity she is immune.

—

A garden now choked with ancient vines,
In the witching hour she is asleep and screaming.
Under her feet lie battle lines,
Her garden turned black with promised redeeming.

Del Di'Lorr. The last watchtower. The Fallen Kingdom of Dryador. Otherworld.
Three days ago.
A garden now choked with ancient vines...
...in the witching hour she is asleep and screaming...
...under her feet lie battle lines...
...her garden turned black with promised redeeming.
There...

It's done.
THUNK!
Well. My dear aunt has collected *no small* number of ***bodies*** for this exercise in divination.
Some might find it excessive--a ***bit much...***
...but we're all family here. *Why lie about art done well?*

Alluvium, Seducer, the Black Bone...
These blades are known to us--we have seen them wet with blood, some of it our own--but there are others I have never heard of.
If the words our sister has spoken are true, then the blades hidden from us will be wielded by those who are not.
Though the taste of some of them will be as ash in our mouths.
Ash comes from a cleansing fire, and I will eat Solem's burnt heart before I swallow my pride and--
Pride?
I have waited thousands of years for this and you think I will allow pride to stand in my way?
Bring me the blades. Bring me their bearers.
Nothing else matters.

Arakko.
Redroot, the Forest. Alluvium.
Do you hear that, High Summoner? The world is not happy with you.
And why would she be? You came to us, begged for a piece of her-- *which she gave in the hopes of reunification*-- and you return here with what?
The promise of violence? *More violence?*
Do you people ever get tired of all that blood you cover yourselves with?

I am what I am. What this world and the other has made me.
Would you rather I *lie*, voice of Arakko, or do you want the *truth?*
Either skin suits you, Summoner. Why not both?
Very well. If you come with us, you have my word that no harm will come to you and that your sword need not leave its sheath.
Well, that's a lie.
Then let this be a truth:
This does not end without the two halves of the world rejoined.
No peace. No quarter given.
It's okay. I know.
I will fight.

Amenth.
Pogg Ur-Pogg.
What do you mean, where did we get it? What concern of that is yours?
It's wealth-- true wealth-- enough to buy a sword, which you are always selling?
Pogg Ur-Pogg is for sale when Pogg Ur-Pogg says it is so!
And those rocks...they smell hot.
Yes. They're stolen. Which is another way the mighty treat the weak.
Are you for hire or not?
Hmmph. For Pogg Ur-Pogg the price is more. Want more! Need more!
And if we told you that if we win there is more? An entire new world to plunder?
Can we count you among our number, Pogg Ur-Pogg?
SHNNK
An entire world, says you? If it be true, then Pogg Ur-Pogg is charmed.
Lead on and Pogg Ur-Pogg will see our enemies harmed!

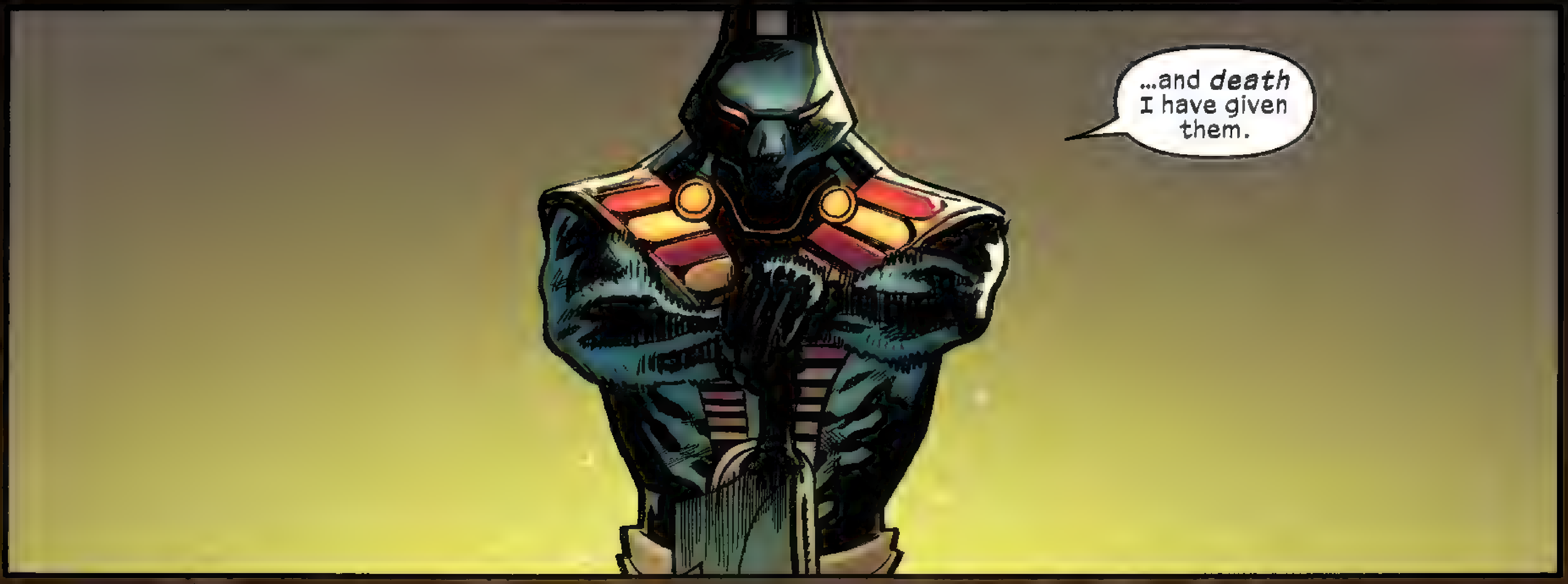
Arakko.
Bei the Blood Moon. Seducer.
Great Bei, slayer of serpents of both sea and air, speaker of the hidden words, destroyer of hope and the all-consum--
What?
‹Yes.›
‹It's a battle--*combat of some kind?* A blood offering of some sort, yes?›
It is.
‹Then what are we waiting for? ***Let's go.*** *I have men to kill.*›

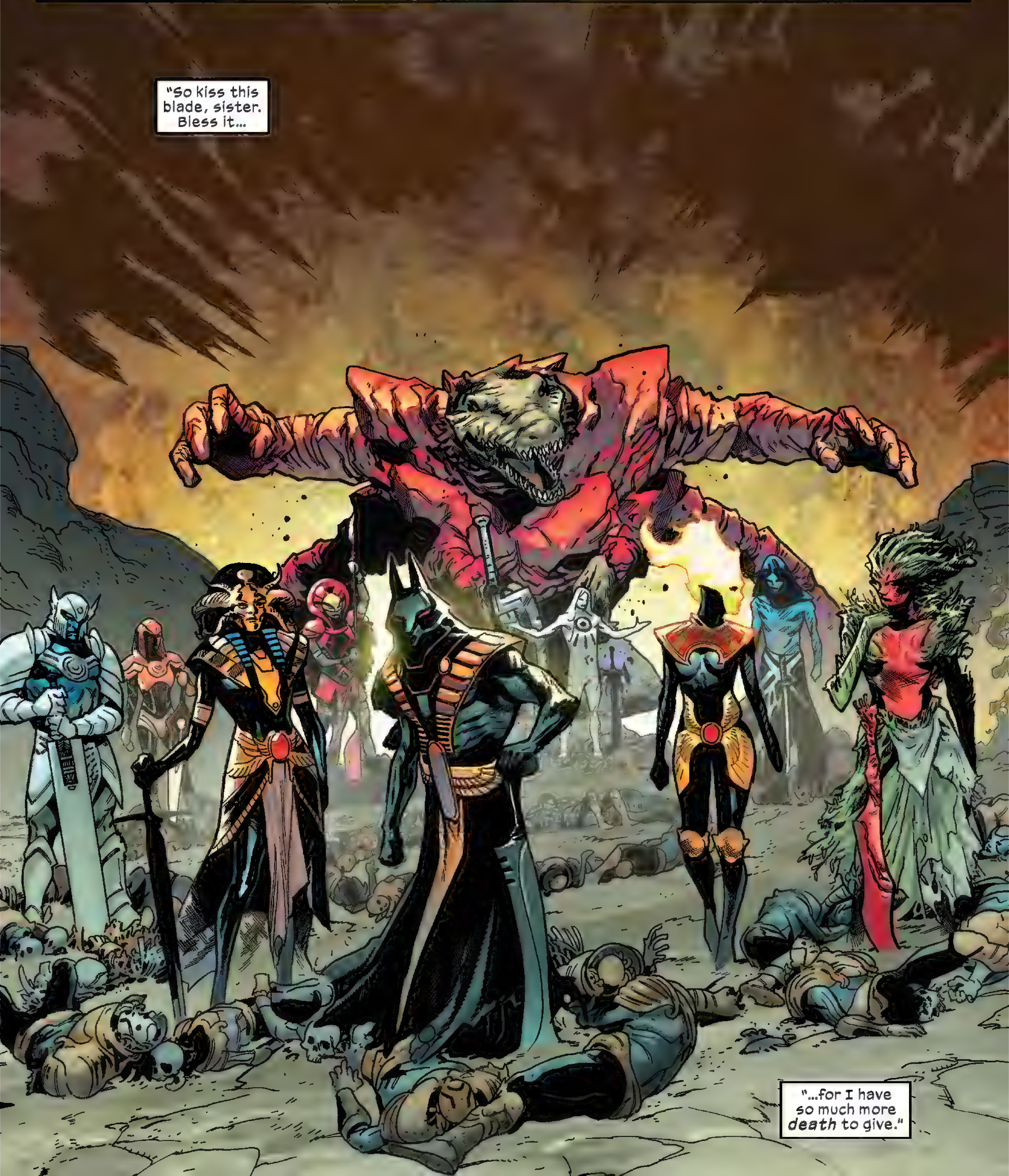
Amenth.
The White Sword of the Ivory Spire. Purity.
Welcome, Horsemen.
That you enter the spire under a flag of peace pleases me to no end.
I've always known how weak you are. How you hide behind your armies. How you always hide in numbers...
It pleases me to turn you away--*to defeat you*--time after time.
And now you, what, come to me with a story of a common enemy? A great cause that unites us? That demands such an alliance?
Hear me, Horsemen...
...*I care for none of that.*
I just want to hear you *beg.*

After all this time, you should know better than to expect certain things.
We don't *beg.*
Hrmpth! I was there when your mother weaned you, child. You were a beggar that day.
And I remember when she beat you, Death, for being weak. I watched you beg her to stop, but she did not. So then you cried...and ran...and hid.
Don't tell me you don't beg. I'm too old for the bold talk of children.
When my 100 left the split land and threw ourselves into this Amenthian Hell, I knew this was where my army would die for old Okkara...
We did that for you, and what did you ever do, except bow your head to Amenth?
How dare you ask me for anything.
Yet here I am. *Asking.* What will it take to make it right? What can I offer you to end this and join us?
Of what worth is a traitor's word?
Nothing, I suppose.
Yet, we still need you. *Ask anything,* and if we win...it is *yours.*
...
Do you have any idea how long I have waited to hear those words?

Arakko.
Isca the Unbeaten. Mercy.

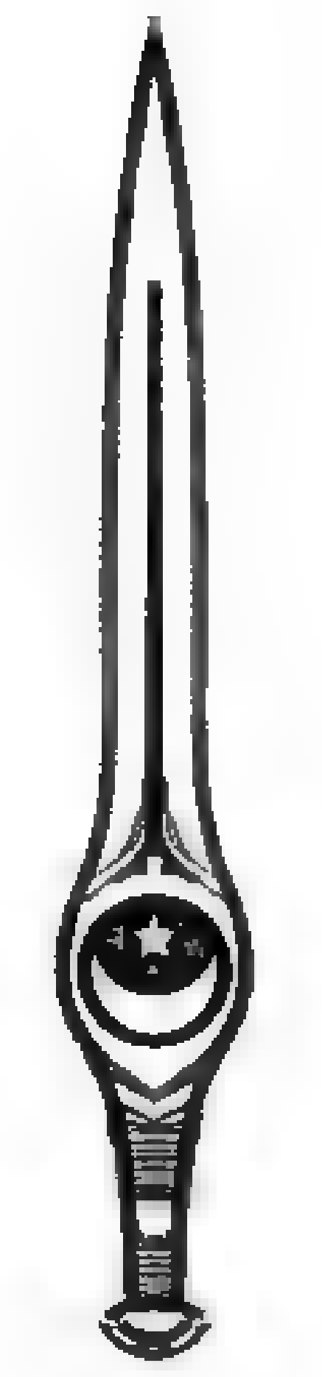
Amenth.
Death.
The Black Bone of Amduat.
When we made peace with the horde, we promised to respect their holy places.
Most of all this temple...
Home of their most sacred relic, the Black Bone of Amduat.
They worshipped death...


...and *death* I have given them.


"So kiss this blade, sister. Bless it...
"...for I have so much more *death* to give."

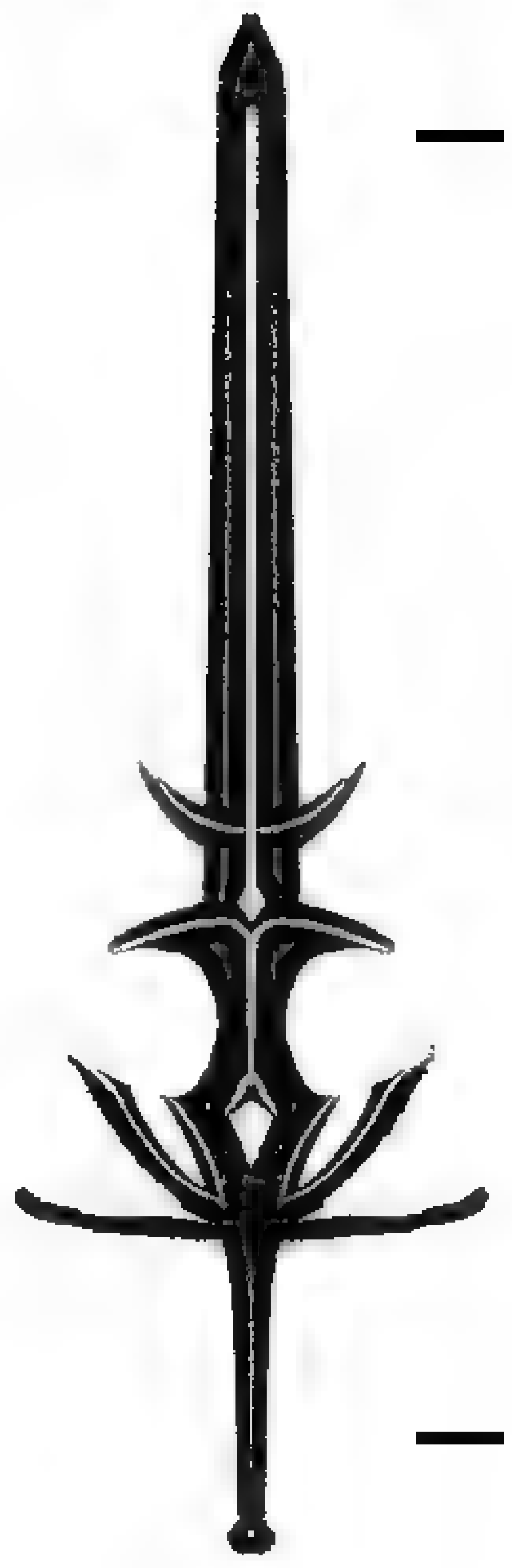
THE BLADES

WAR



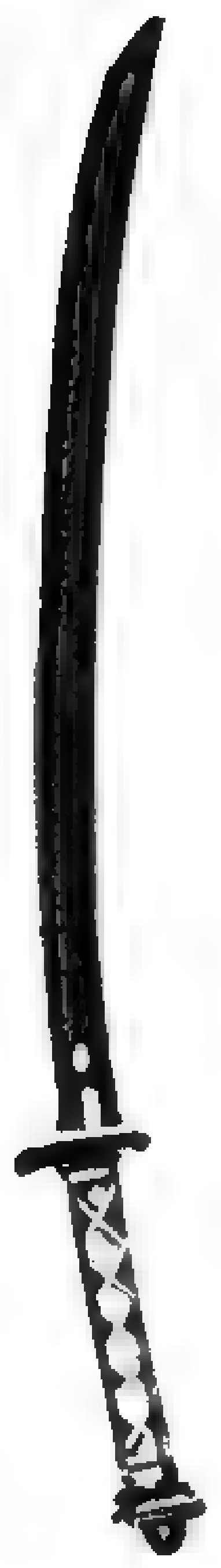
MUTANT FROM OKKARA
SWORD..............**VERMILION**
......**[THE RED SWORD OF WAR]**
MUTANT POWER............**FIRE**

SUMMONER



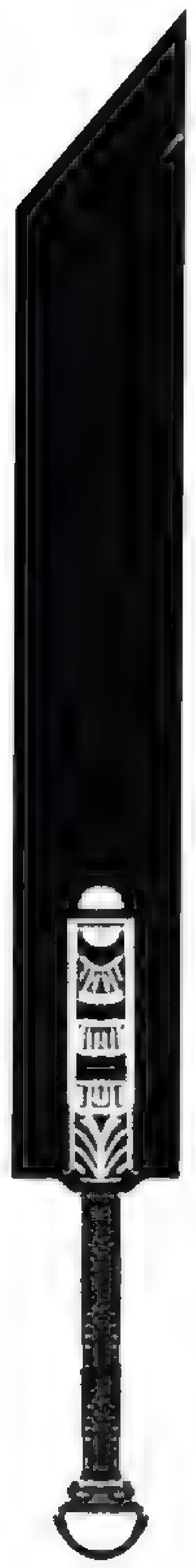
[BIRTH NAME STRICKEN
FROM RECORD]
MUTANT FROM ARAKKO
SWORD................ **COLONY**
MUTANT POWER...............
.... **INVULNERABILITY**
NOTE...... **IS ALSO A TRAINED**
.... **HIGH SUMMONER OF AMENTH**

SOLEM



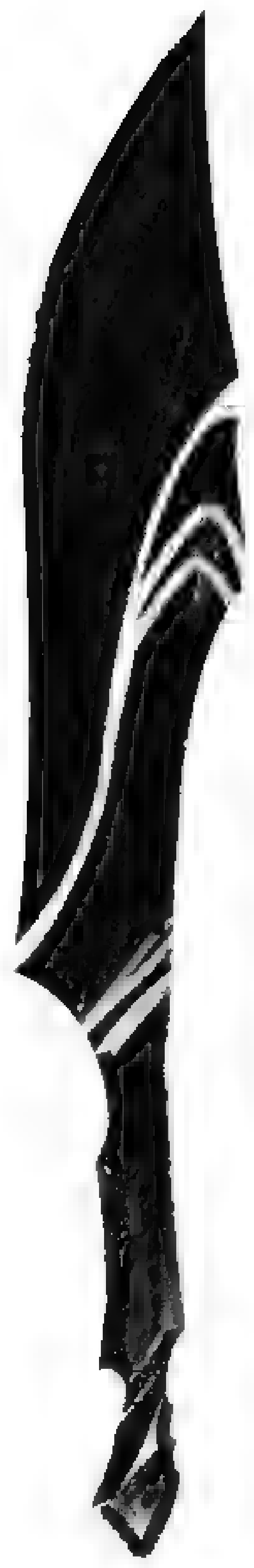
MUTANT FROM ARAKKO
SWORD..............**MURAMASA**
MUTANT POWER................
.............**ADAMANTIUM SKIN**

THE WHITE SWORD OF THE IVORY SPIRE



MUTANT FROM OKKARA
SWORD................ **PURITY**
MUTANT POWER........ **HEALING**

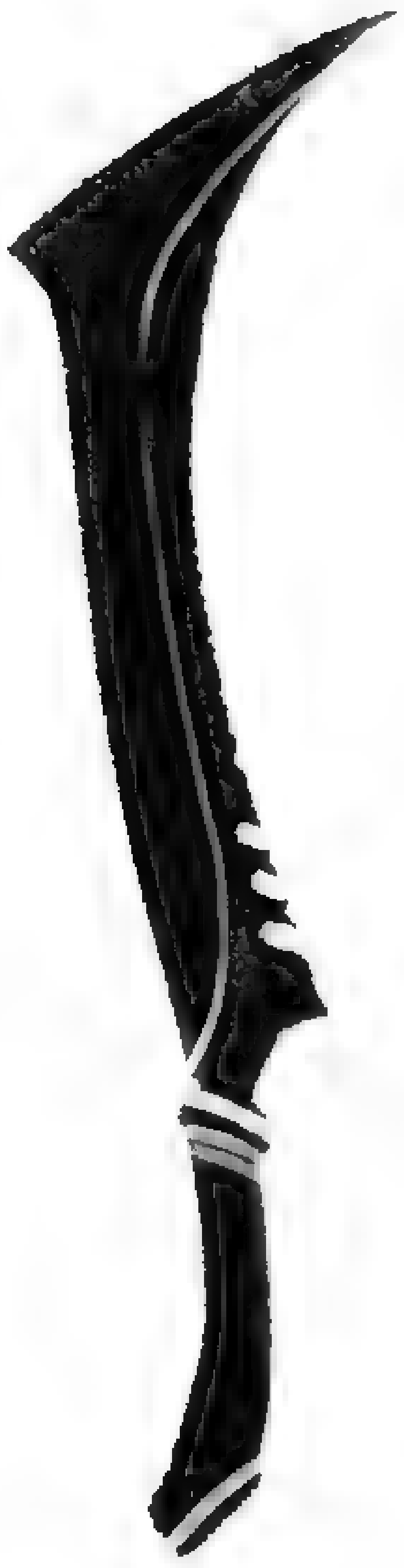
REDROOT THE FOREST



PURE-BLOOD MUTANT
RECLAIMED FROM AMENTH
SWORD.............. **ALLUVIUM**
MUTANT POWER...... **BOTOMANCY**
NOTE...... **IS ALSO THE VOICE**
.... **OF ARAKKO**

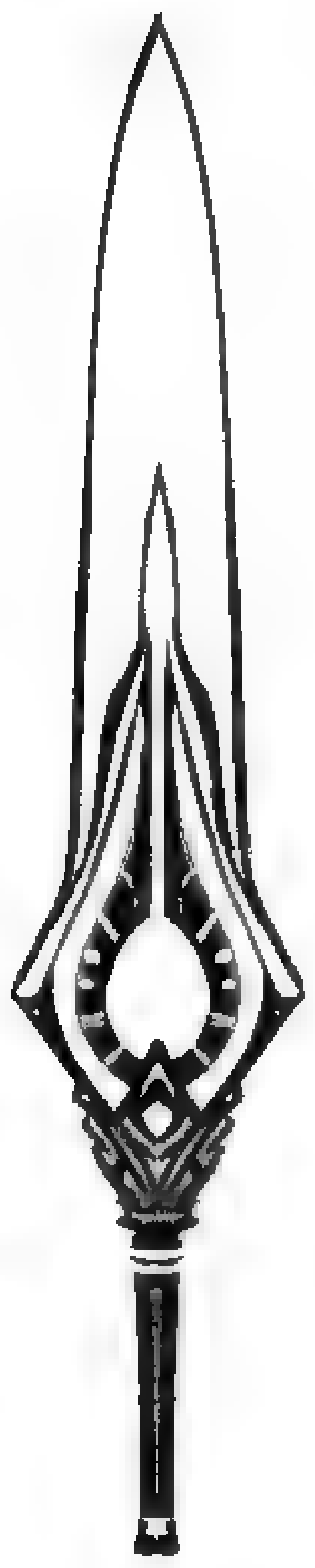
OF ARAKKO

DEATH



MUTANT FROM OKKARA
SWORD........ **THE BLACK BONE**
.... **OF AMDUAT**
MUTANT POWER...............
.... **THE EYES OF DEATH**

ISCA THE UNBEATEN



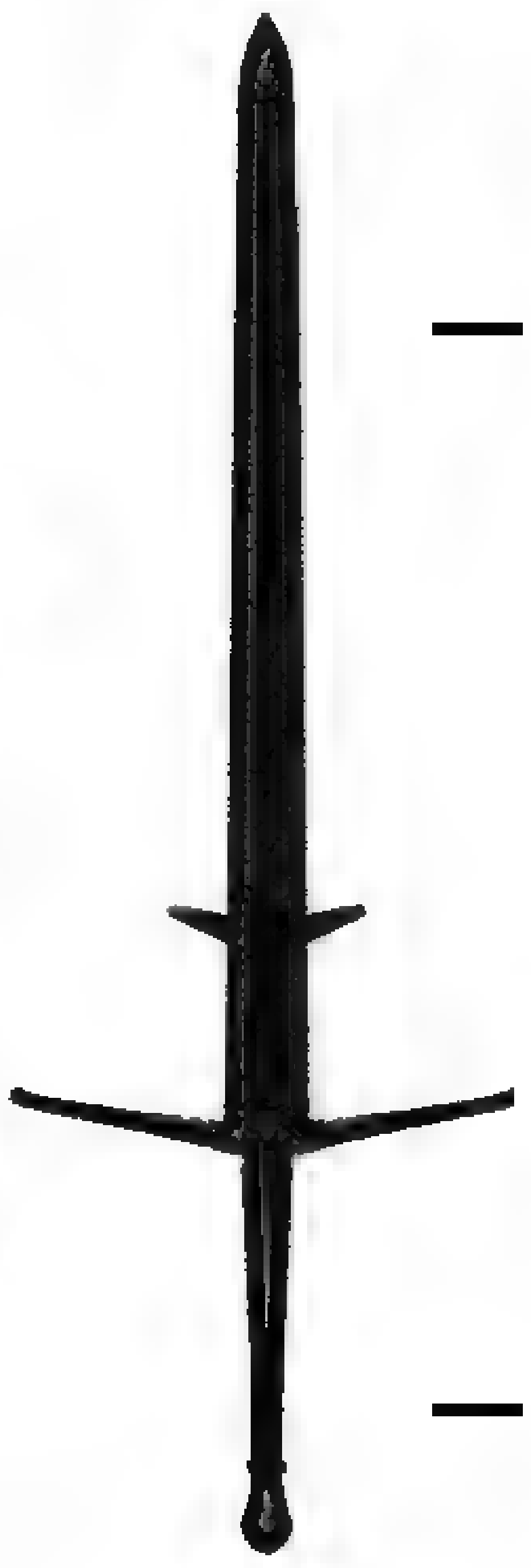
MUTANT FROM OKKARA
SWORD................. **MERCY**
MUTANT POWER.... **CANNOT LOSE**

ANNIHILATION

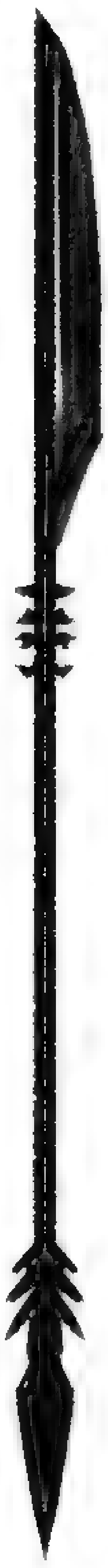
[redacted]

[redacted]

SWORD.....**THE TWILIGHT BLADE**
MUTANT POWER.....[redacted]
....[redacted]

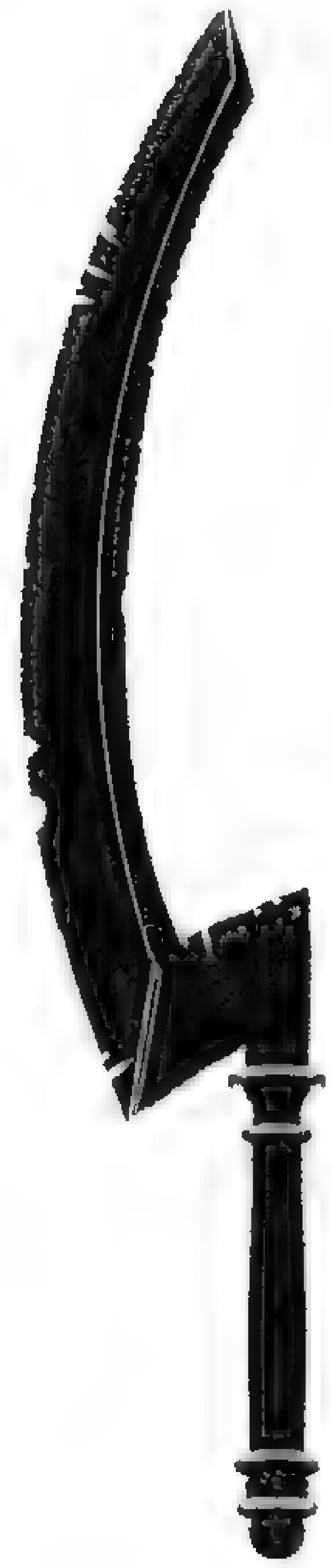


BEI THE BLOOD MOON



MUTANT FROM ARAKKO
SWORD................**SEDUCER**
MUTANT POWER...**THE DOOM NOTE**

POGG UR-POGG



A BEAST FROM AMENTH
SWORD.......... POGG UR-POGG
MUTANT POWER........... **NONE**

[00.ARRAKO.. .. ...X]
[X..... ..OKKARA.00]

Starlight Citadel. Otherworld.
An arrival of champions.
KSH--
KSH-KSH-KRAK--
Aaah!
Everyone all right?
Yeah, like a regular gate, but it tingles.
Betsy, do you *live* here?
...Hah.
I'm hardly welcome here.
That is true of us *all*. We do not know if this is friendly ground. Tread as carefully here as you would on a new *planet*.
Storm is exactly right. The Lady Saturnyne is powerful enough to be as fickle as she pleases.
And she oft *pleases*.

This is part of her plan. How unsettled we are, how unsure. It's how she operates. Everything is in flux now, and the rules don't have to make sense to *anyone* but *her*.
What *rules?* I haven't heard any rules!
We got *teleported* here after some sort of ritual. I thought we were gonna have to...you know. *Use* these swords.
Same question. I would like to use my sword.
The swords were a *key*. Think of them as a *pass*--a way to signal that you are worthy of the next steps.
I don't think I need *steps* and *rules* to figure out how to use a *sword*.
The Wolverine is correct.
If the white witch chooses to play a game, I say we cut the board in half.
I am far too old for *games*.
Patience.
We will abide as long as the game suits us.
We are-- *primarily*--mutant. Saturnyne is tricky, yes, but she does not have within her the thing that joins us all.
I'll tell ya what joins us all-- *everything dies if you can figure out how to kill it.*
Indeed it *does*, Wolverine.

Sorry to interrupt, but this is--*after all*--my *house*.
And in it, I will do whatever I please.
Tell me, you *awful little man*, what happens when you die? *Here?* In this realm?
I could do it with a snap of my finger, you know. No more *Wolverine, anywhere. Ever.*
Don't.
This is your game and we are your pawns. Is that what you want to hear?
You've brought us here on your terms. At least give us the rules so that we can play *fair*.
Don't rush me. I don't like it. Or *you*.
I have had each of your chambers prepared. You may freshen up before this evening's *feast* in the Hall of Fallen Banners...
...*there* you will meet your fellow combatants.

CREAK
What's this, then?
From Saturnyne?
NINE OF SWO
What the heck does *this* mean?
TWO
Ridiculous.

Saturnyne.
What could you be up to this time?
KNIGHT OF PENTACLES
Nice.
TH F WANDS
Oh, come on...
THE FOOL
...really?!

SNIKT
STRENGTH
DEATH
CRUNCH
The game no longer suits me.

As I call my power to me...
As I wish it...
...so it shall be.
My lady?
Your next meeting is waiting downstairs for you. She is... impatient.
Shall I escort you?
By all means.
What a lovely evening it is to take in the air at the top.
Enjoy it while it lasts, witch.
Stand back!
You dare?!

I dare?!
What is the *meaning* of these taunts? This *nonsense?*
Apocalypse. You big, reckless oaf.
What have you done to my lovely card?
Answer me.
Explain yourself before I become *angry.*
Those cards are *very* old, and they're the only set *quite* like that.
I'd appreciate it if you treated them more kindly. You *are* a guest here.
Do not speak to me of *hospitality.*
It is one of the world's *oldest* arts. And I am one of the *world's oldest.*
It's just a *card,* Apocalypse.
You oughtn't let it get you so upset.
DING!

If you'd like to continue your conversation, the lady means for you to *follow.*
You're very curious to me, Apocalypse. You defeated Morgan Le Fay in battle-- which I considered a lucky favor.
But instead of coming to me as my ally, you've spied, invaded and downright *bullied* your way into my citadel.
But in the end? I *invited* you in.
Does that *sting?*
That you needed an *invitation?*

Are you provoking me, witch?
You say *witch* like a man who hasn't been doing *naughty rituals* all across existence.
Everything I have done, every *gate I have opened* here is a step toward something I have been crawling toward for *millennia*.
You're taking this barely realized theory of magic you *claim* to have been studying for centuries to its *grand conclusion* so quickly...
WHUMM
It isn't like you.
Not that I know you *well*, but I do know you're very old. You said that yourself. Which is why I'm so surprised by you.
You are a *lot* of things, Apocalypse...and you have a *lot* of flaws...
But you are too old to be *impatient*.

DING!
Here we are.
Where is here?
My next meeting. With the contest so close at hand, I'm *very* busy.
But you seemed so intent on talking, I thought you could accompany me on my way to the next appointment.
And, well...considering the card, I thought you might be interested.
I know that helm.
I have seen it ***every night*** for thousands of years...
...in ***dreams*** of *rescue* and *revenge*...
THE LOVERS
...and ***nightmares*** of what I had lost and the things I would do to *reclaim* it...

The *violent horrors* I would bring to my ancient enemy in the name of my eternal love.
And now it seems...they are one and the same.
Tell me... Tell me *how!*
You *know* the answer, husband of mine:
Survival of the fittest.

PLEASE READ:
DOES THIS FORTUNE BELONG TO YOU?
(It happened again!)

I had another strange reading the other night. But with regard to recent events, I was not as surprised. But I did think I should tell everyone about it. No sooner had I pulled the first card that I felt compelled to draw and draw and draw -- until I had nine before me.

Nine is a sacred number to many, and a nine-card reading is nothing strange, but the reading itself was.

NINE OF SWORDS: This is for when you are ruining yourself with your own fears and nightmares. But as they say, *just because you are paranoid does not mean they are not after you!* Not many of the cards are bad.... but this is a bad card.

TWO OF CUPS: It is said the Lovers is not the card of true love - this one is. *Harmony* is this one's future. But it can be perilous to form such bonds in times of war!

HIDDEN: This is the one that let me know this was not an ordinary reading. This card would only show me the back. I flipped it to reveal itself and -- wouldn't you know -- another back! I flipped it again and again, picked it up to examine it -- somehow, I had a card with no message! But even nothing can be for someone, yes? So I pass it along...

KNIGHT OF PENTACLES: Sometimes these are called *coins* instead of pentacles, for they speak of practicality and prosperity. This man has no master plan but will work for what must be done. Could be money in his future?

PAGE OF WANDS: Like the Knight, the Page is a person. A tricky one! Clever. Never stuck in one place. Arrogant, but a good friend to have.

THE FOOL: Do not be offended! The tarot is sometimes called "the journey of the fool." The Fool does not know things yet, but he will *learn*. Ah, the folly of youth.

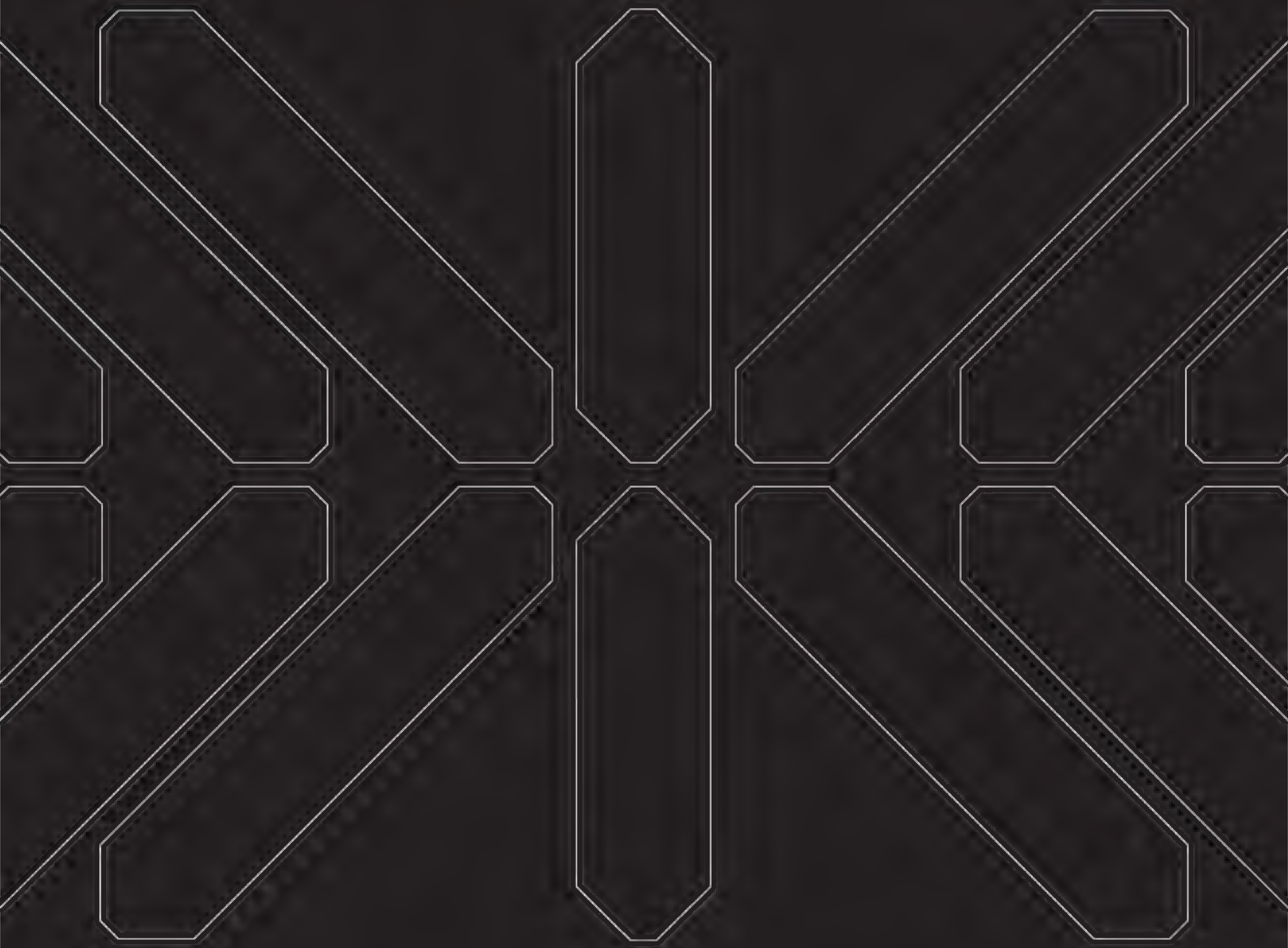
STRENGTH: Do not be *flattered* -- this speaks not of the strength of biceps, but the strength of will, strength of heart, strength of focus. This is one who endures.

DEATH: Do not be afraid. This is not the card of failure and decay, but of the natural harvest. The season before can never come again. Metamorphosis.

THE LOVERS: This card is indeed a tale of lovers, but they have *been* lovers. The presence of this card can portent a great test where there was once harmony.

--TAROT

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

X-MEN #14

[XOS] [X14]

HICKMAN
ASRAR
YU
GHO

PART 12 OF 22

CHAPTER

12

Otherworld. The Starlight Citadel.

This place feels like a refuge--*where the weak go to hide.*
Are you **hiding,** *my love?*
I wanted... *peace.* A bit of *peace* before tomorrow and what tomorrow brings.
So you're a man of peace now? Have you ***fallen*** so far?
You're wielding the *Twilight Blade.*
Who, again, is it here that has ***fallen?***
What? *This thing?*

The Twilight Blade is just a tool. Is it powerful? *Yes.* Is it dangerous? Yes.
Is it the most dangerous thing in this garden?
It most certainly *is* *not.*
I feel like you're trying to test me.
No. Testing comes on the morrow, En Sabah Nur.
I was hoping we could simply... *talk.*
Don't you want to know what happened to us? How we came to be here? How I hold this blade?
You are less of a mystery. The High Summoner has kept us informed while keeping you misinformed--but I know how they speak of you and of this nation you helped form...
So, *surely...*

...you'd rather *talk* than *fight*, no?
Every bone in me aches at the sight of you.
Then come, *my love*...
Walk with me.

[the__one]
[the__land]

A MUTANT’S HISTORY OF
ARAKKO
+
AND THE FALLEN WORLD OF AMENTH

[x_Okkara_]
[x_Arakko_]

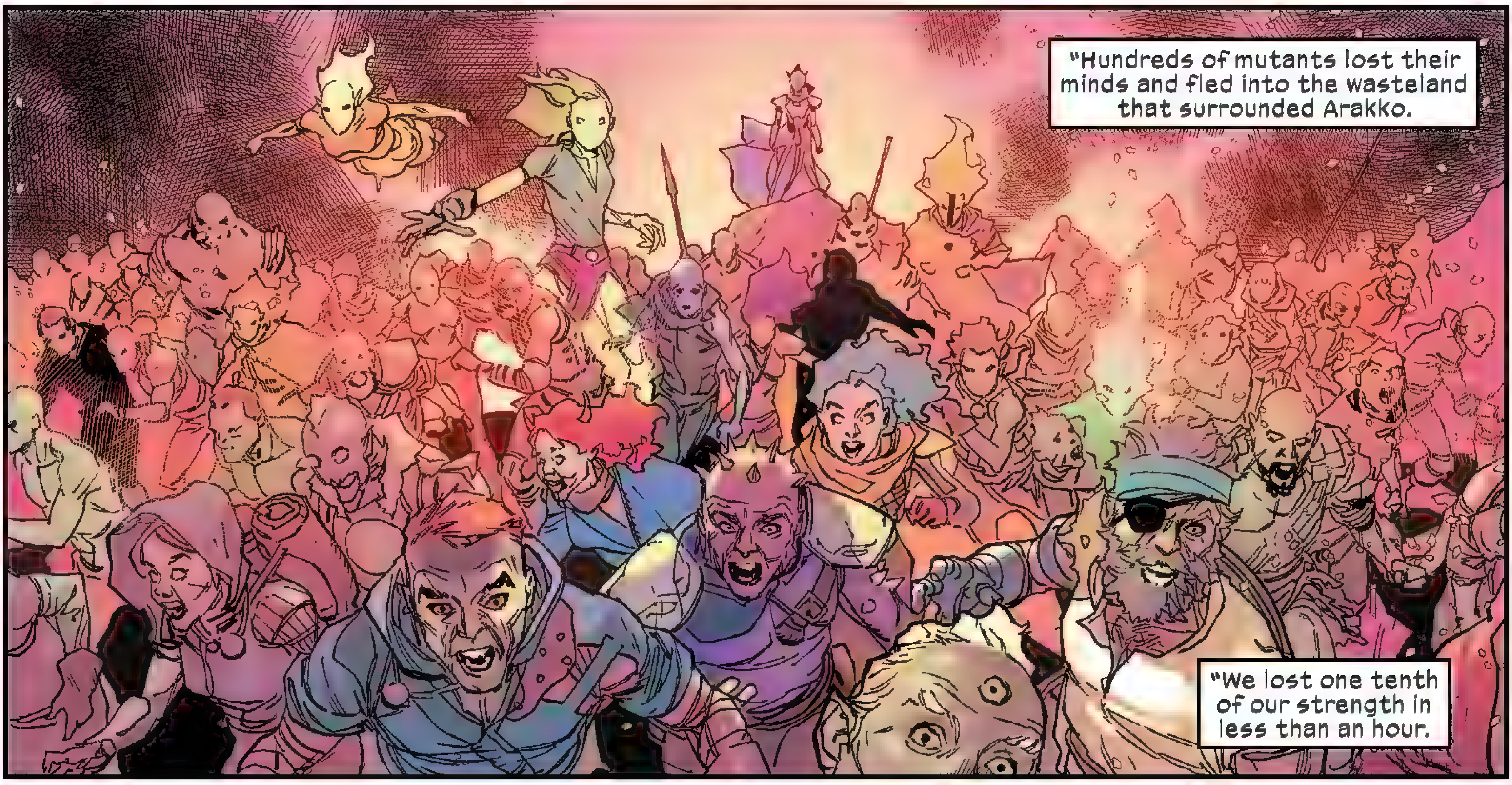
[...............X]
[...............X]

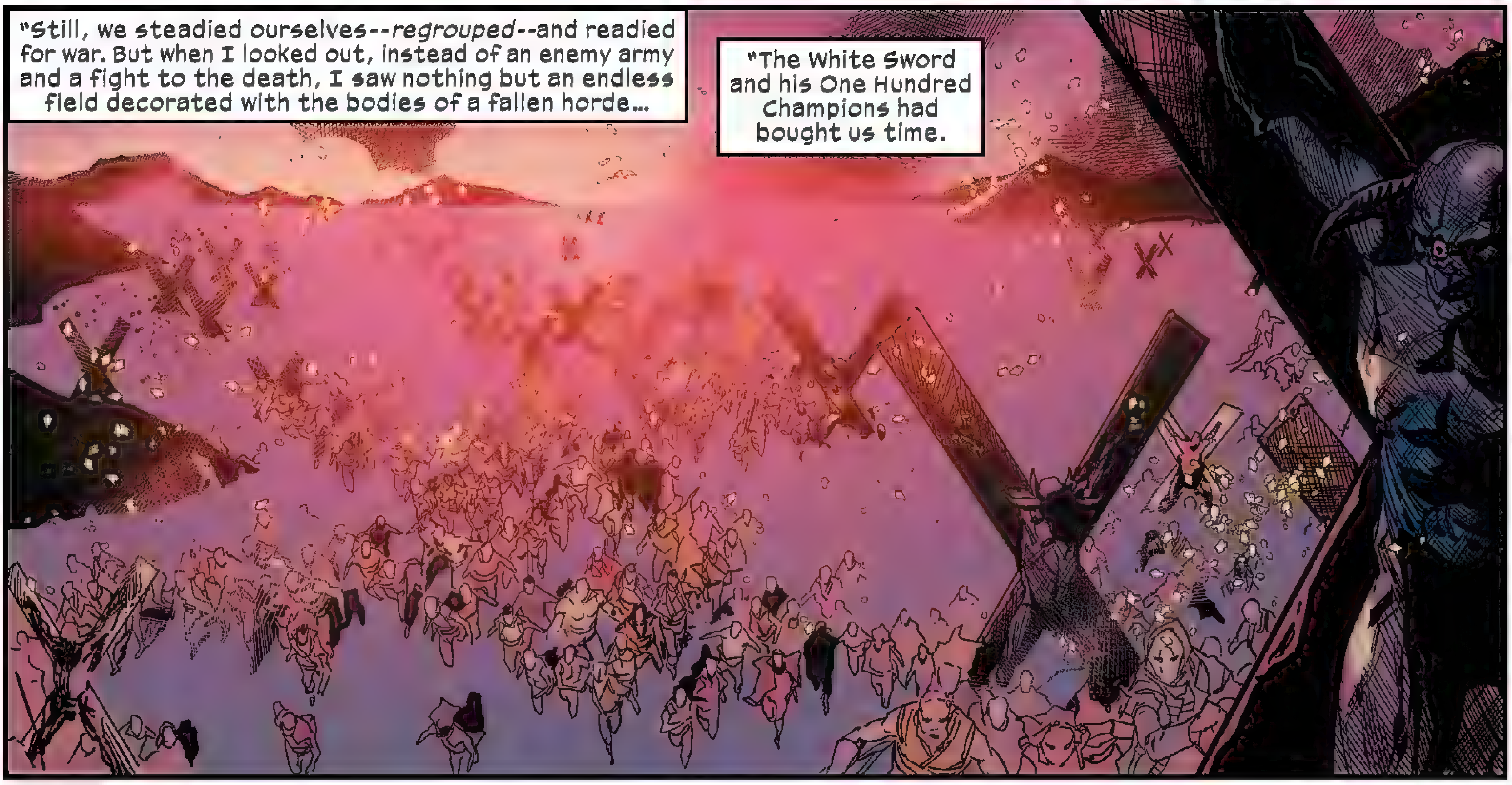
[Summoner]
[___Lies]

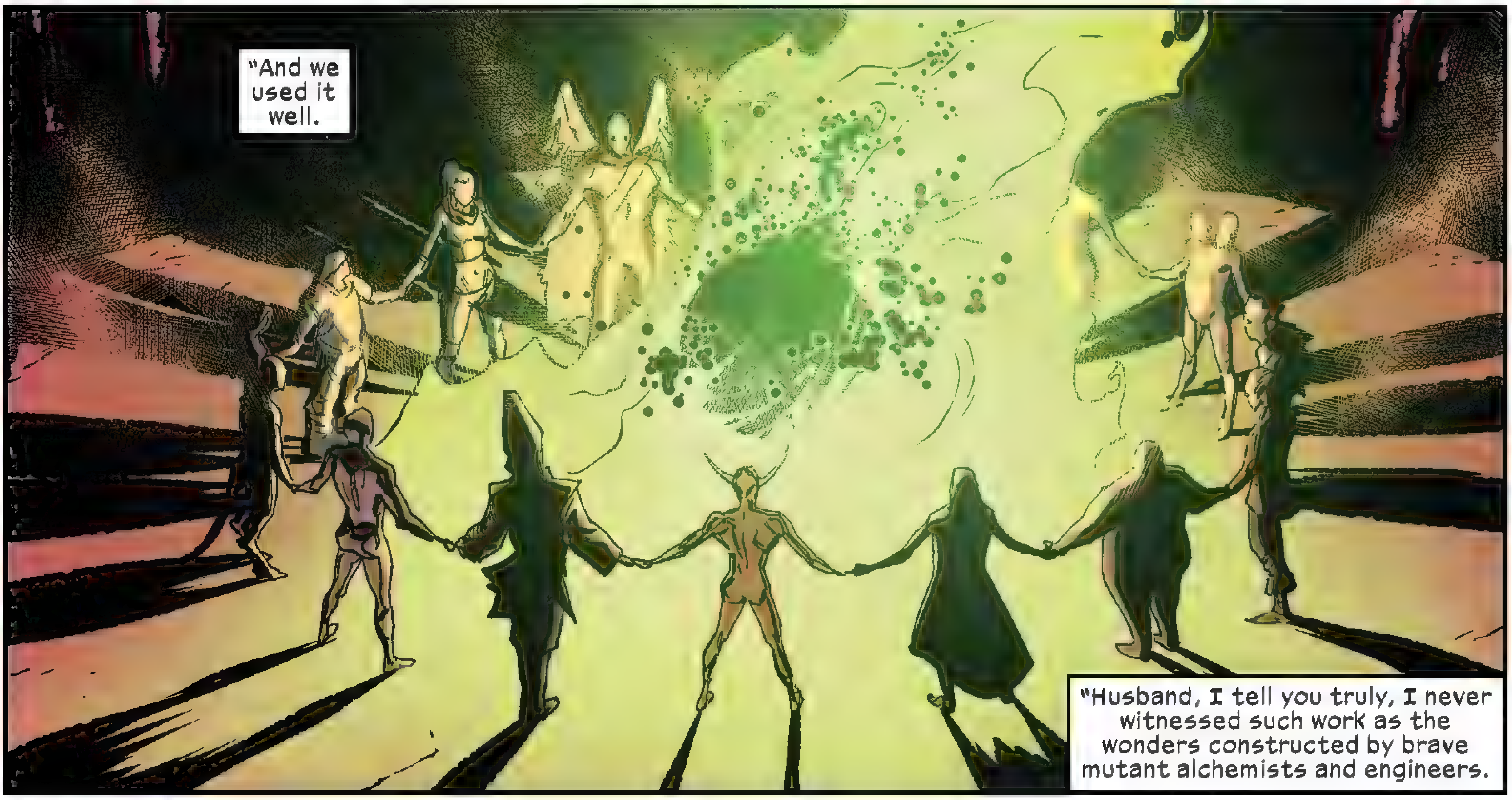
"I know you remember the high halcyon days of mutantdom, En Sabah Nur. I know you remember, Okkara, the one land of mutants.
"It was ancient before that word existed but not yet old in the way they were old.
"The Twilight Sword of the enemy tore the world asunder, and what was one became two.
"And from the chasm between them--*from Amenth*--the enemy poured into this world.

"Until, at great cost, the army of the enemy, Annihilation--*along with Arakko itself*--was pushed back through, and the chasm was sealed shut.
"There are whispers in Arakko of why the husband of Genesis--*the father of the Horsemen*--remained behind...
"Some kiss the edge of truth...
"Some are lies that offended me...

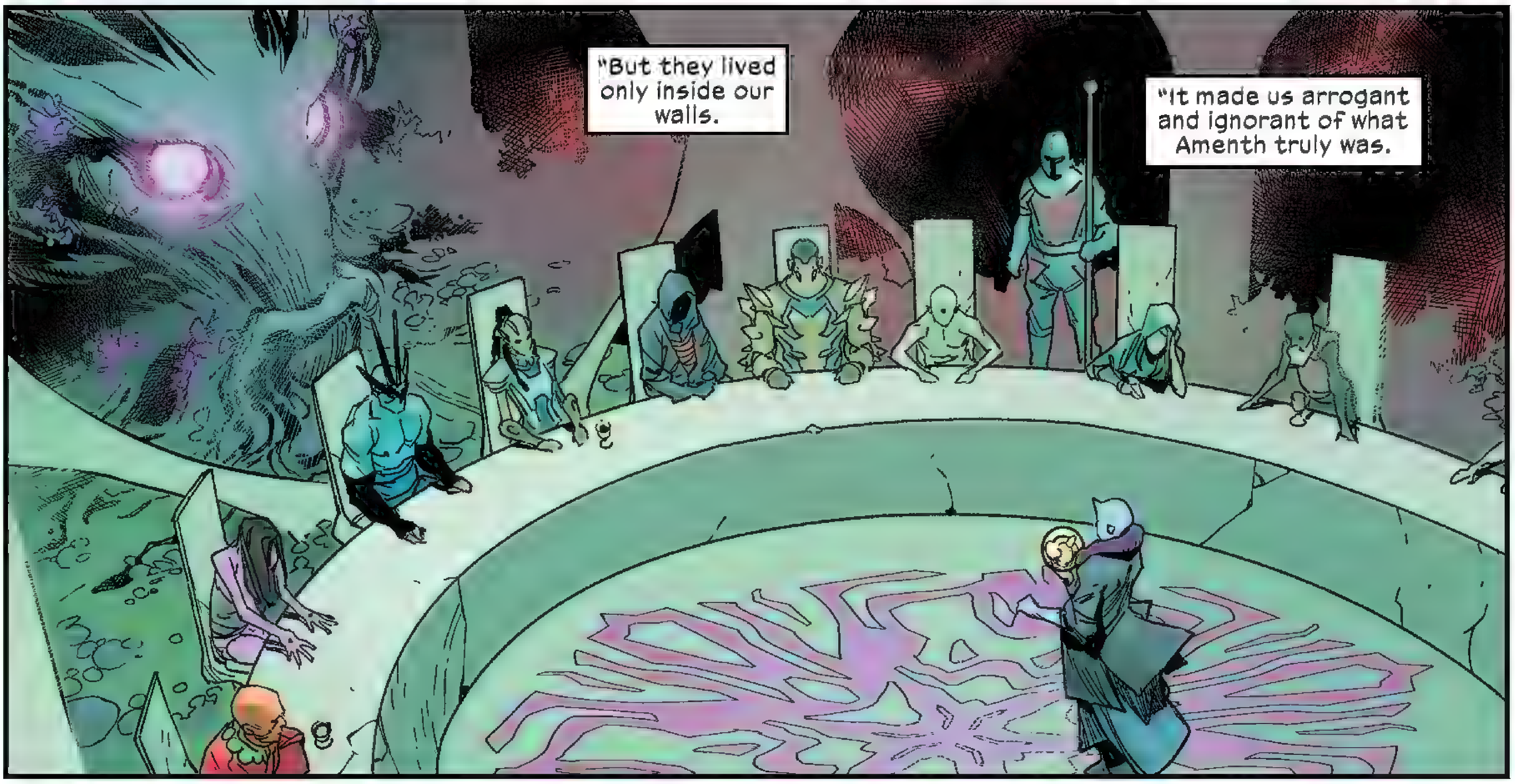
"We, however, both know the real reason you stayed.
"And the only truth that matters is this:
"What should never have been cleaved in two was separated forever...
"Husband from wife. Parent from child. *Arakko* from *Krakoa.*
"How do I describe the sound of the chasm closing? If I say it was as if one thousand angels died screaming bloody thunder, I know that number is low.
"It was deafening. *Maddening.* The alien song of the world *Amenth.*

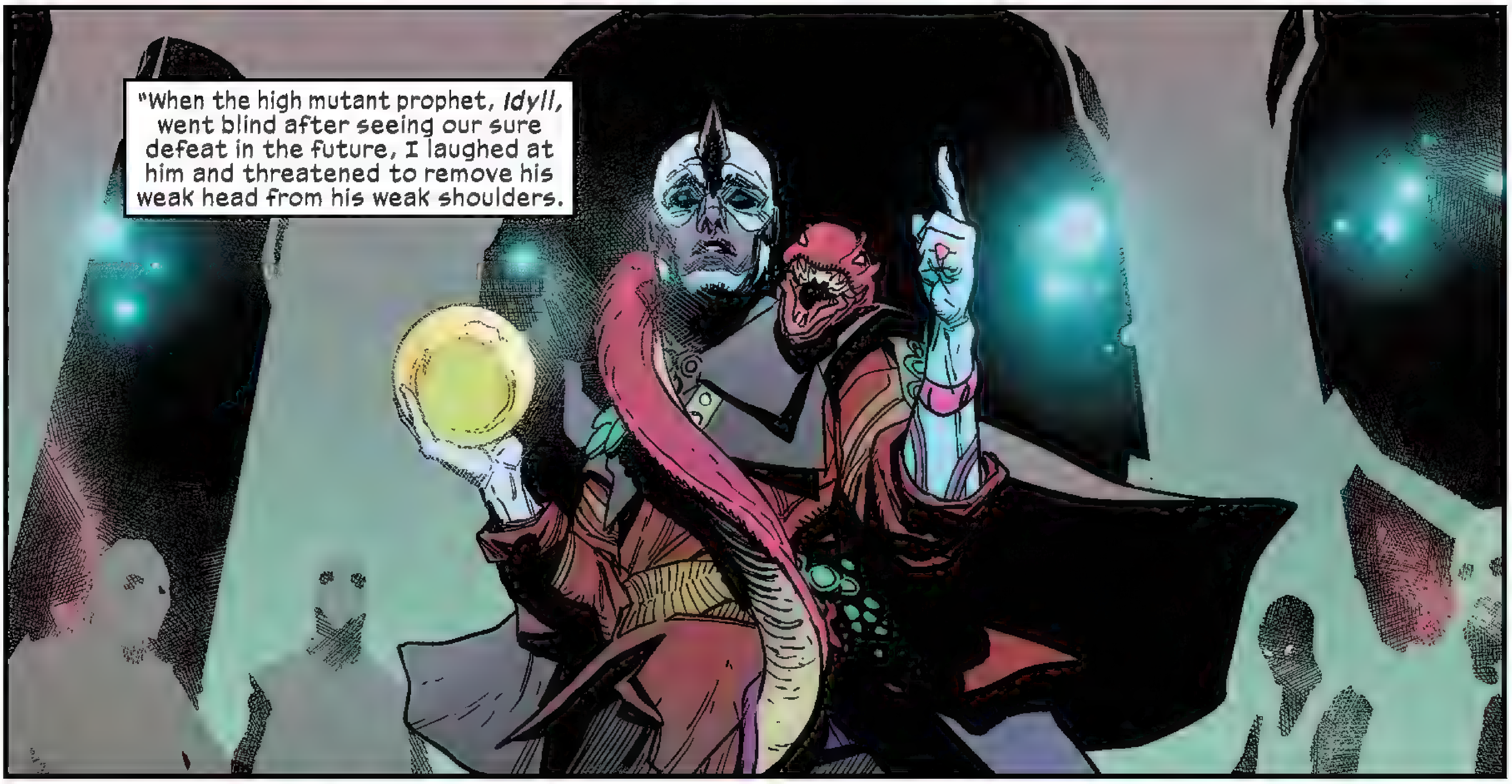

"Hundreds of mutants lost their minds and fled into the wasteland that surrounded Arakko.
"We lost one tenth of our strength in less than an hour.

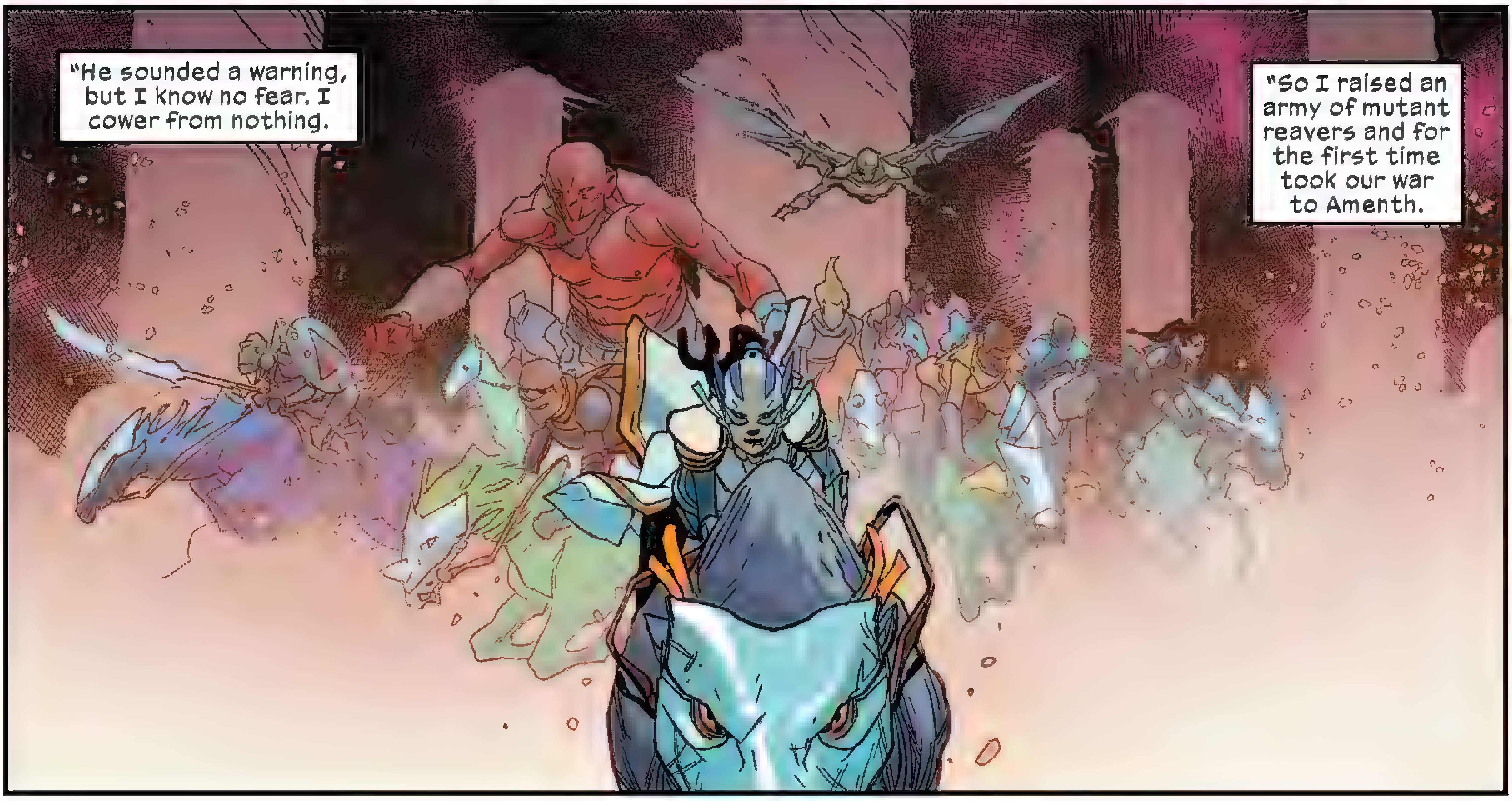

"Still, we steadied ourselves--*regrouped*--and readied for war. But when I looked out, instead of an enemy army and a fight to the death, I saw nothing but an endless field decorated with the bodies of a fallen horde...
"The White Sword and his One Hundred Champions had bought us time.


"And we used it well.
"Husband, I tell you truly, I never witnessed such work as the wonders constructed by brave mutant alchemists and engineers.

"They made an armor for Arakko. We raised ten towers, and all the land between them became a killing field.
"When the army of Amenth finally came, we showed them what real mutants could become when forced to truly fight for our survival.
"We were a machine of death, and for *thousands of years,* the horde died at our border.
"Generations of mutants lived and died never knowing defeat.
"Children of War--strong and fit for the days in which they lived.

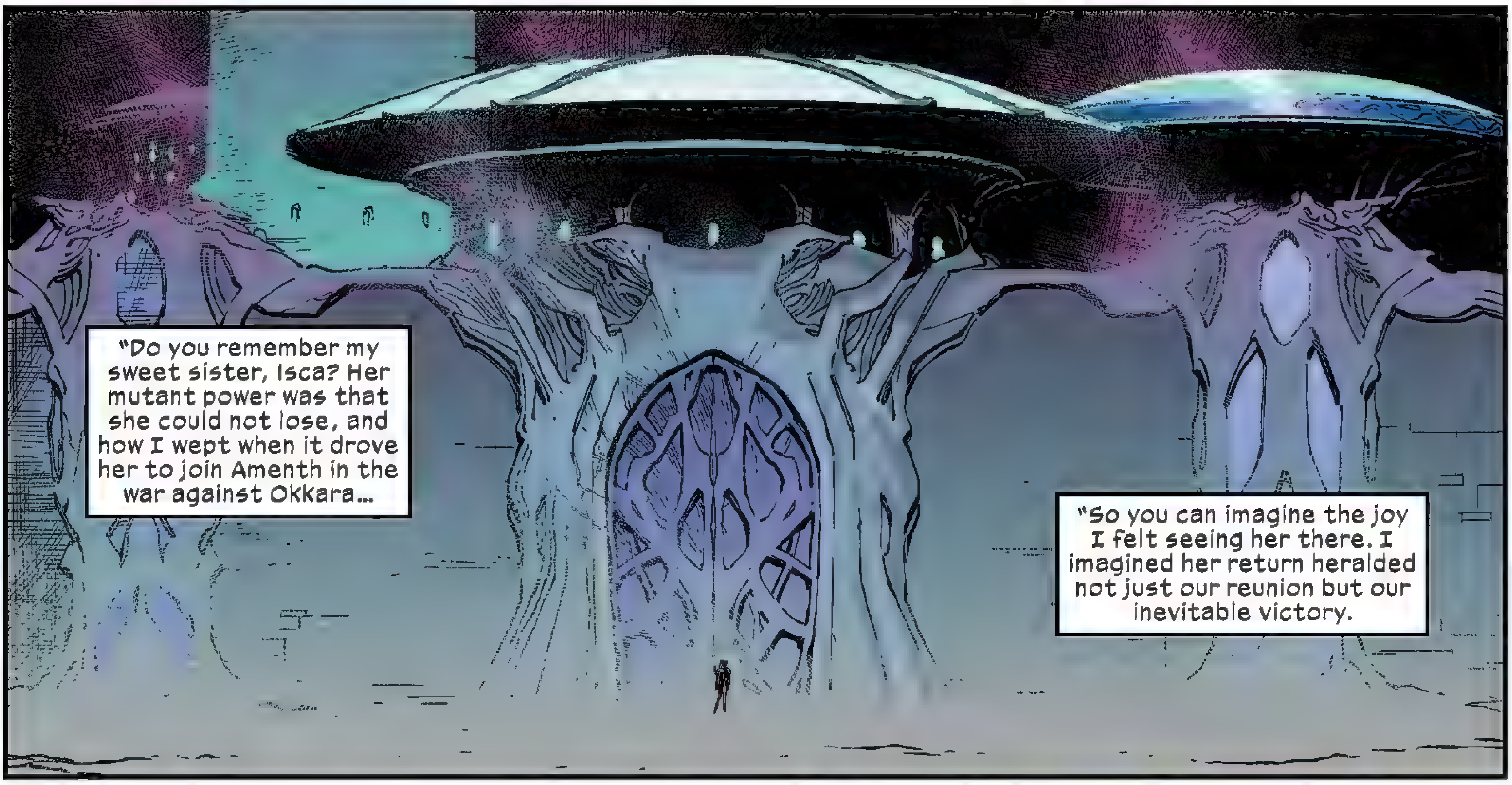

"But they lived only inside our walls.
"It made us arrogant and ignorant of what Amenth truly was.

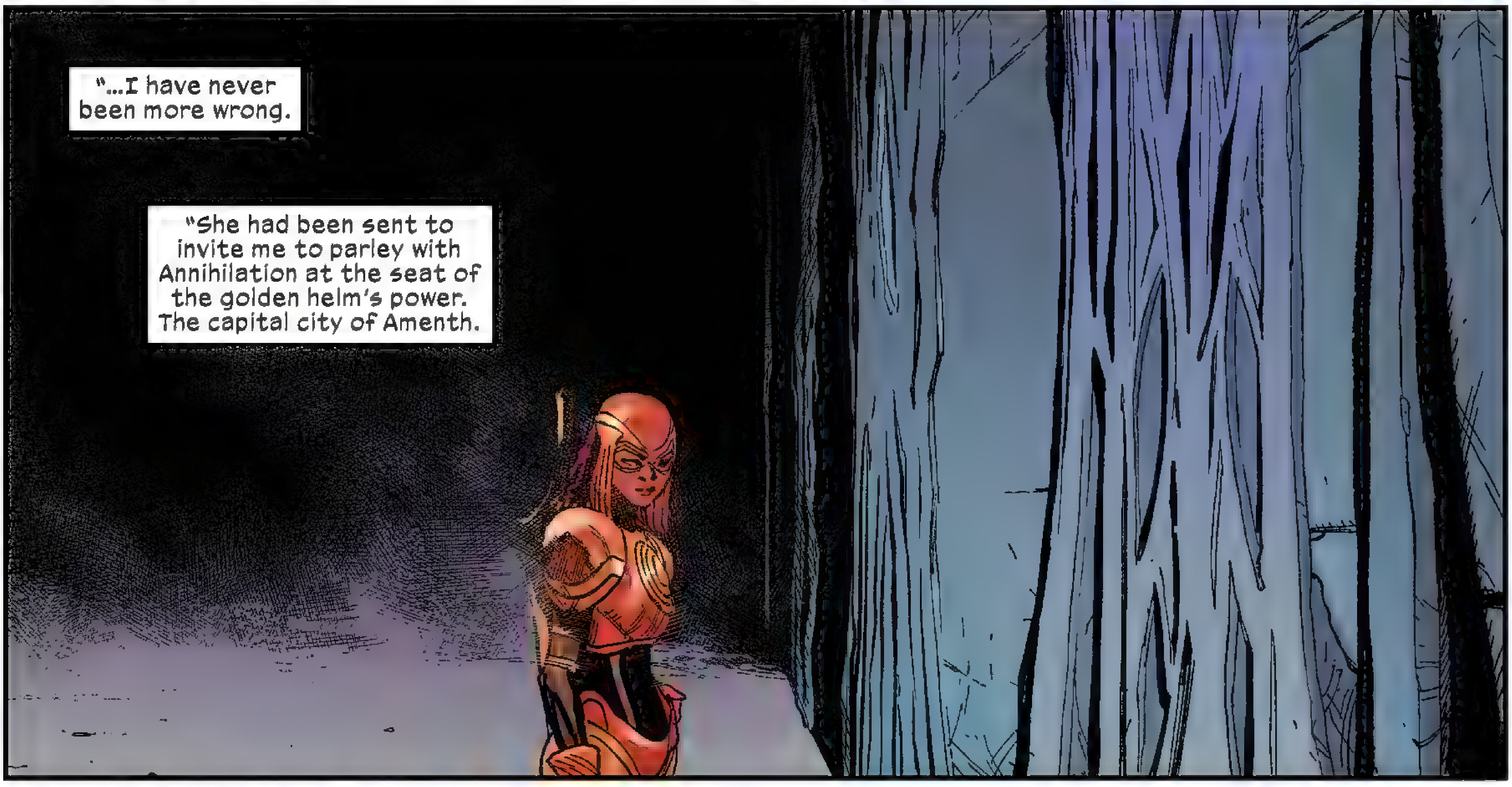

"When the high mutant prophet, *Idyll*, went blind after seeing our sure defeat in the future, I laughed at him and threatened to remove his weak head from his weak shoulders.

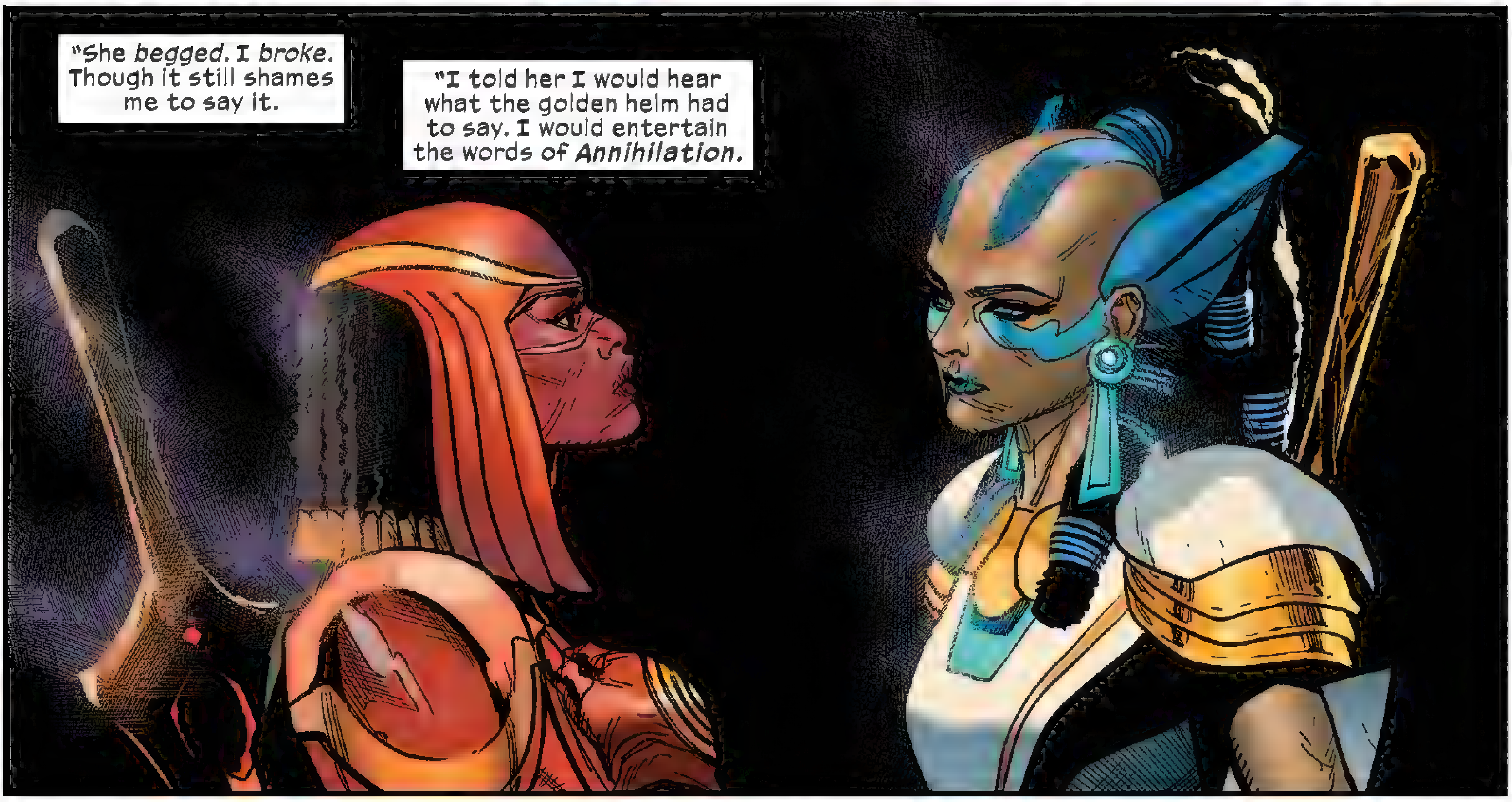

"He sounded a warning, but I know no fear. I cower from nothing.
"So I raised an army of mutant reavers and for the first time took our war to Amenth.

"We left our walls behind and drove our way into enemy territory.
"I swear to you, my love, I bathed *nightly* in the blood of those I had broken on the battlefield.
"Two hundred years ago, we had pushed so far that we reached the Ivory Spire. The stronghold of the long-thought-lost White Sword, Purity.
"Our greatest healer--*external, immortal*--the ***White Sword*** resurrected his One Hundred Champions every morning and then rode out to slaughter Amenthi demons.

"To say the millennia that had passed changed him is to sound like a fool, husband. The death and resurrection cycle he lived each day had become his religion.
"To us, he was as alien as the horde he raged against. And we the same to him.
"It was not that he killed scores of mutants when he drove us out that pained me so--*if they were fit, they would have survived*--no, it was that when we first tasted defeat it was at the hands of one of our own.
"It was a spoiled meat that was the first of many ill meals to follow.
"I returned to Arakko to find Isca waiting for us.

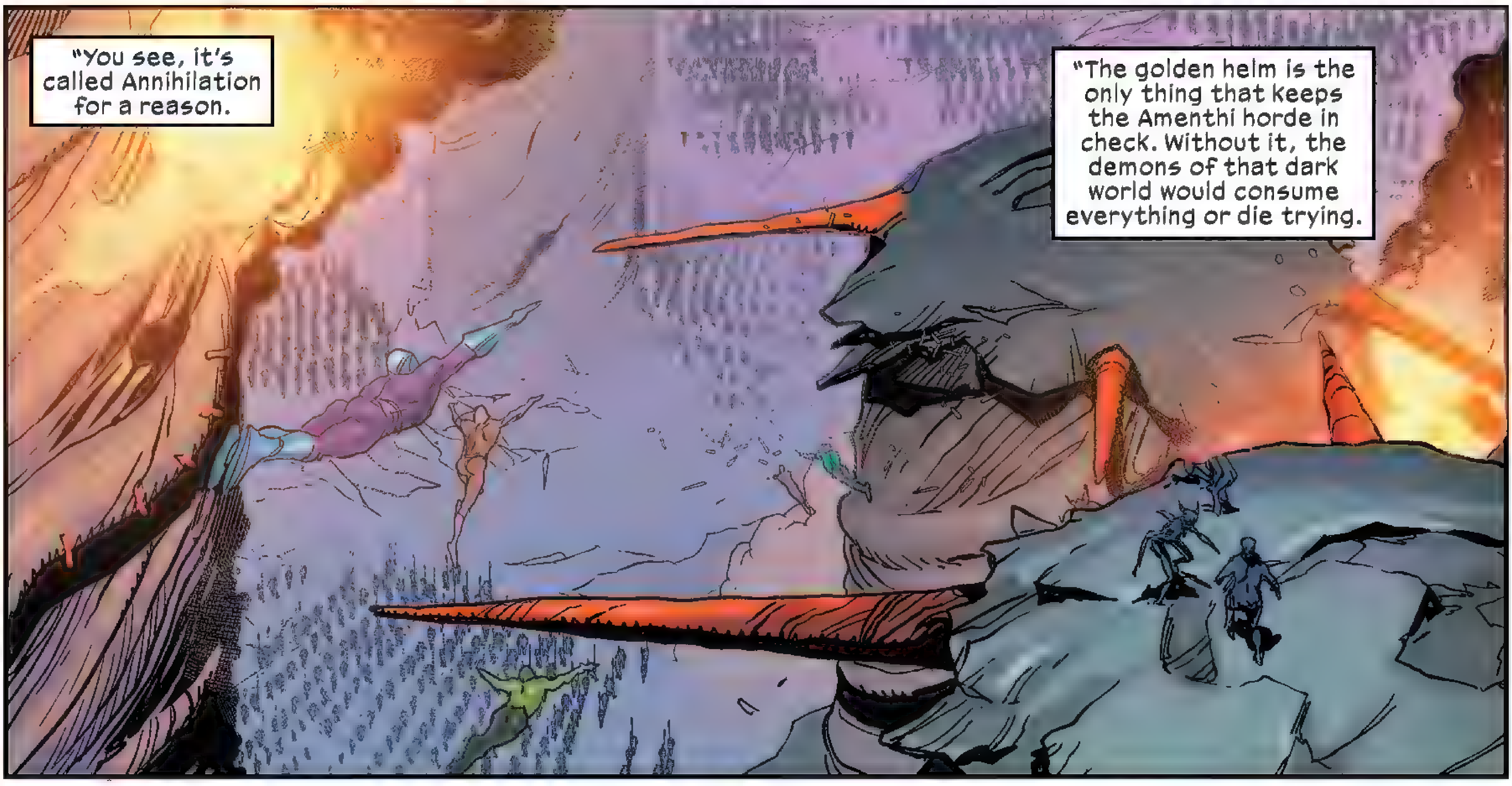

"Do you remember my sweet sister, Isca? Her mutant power was that she could not lose, and how I wept when it drove her to join Amenth in the war against Okkara...
"So you can imagine the joy I felt seeing her there. I imagined her return heralded not just our reunion but our inevitable victory.

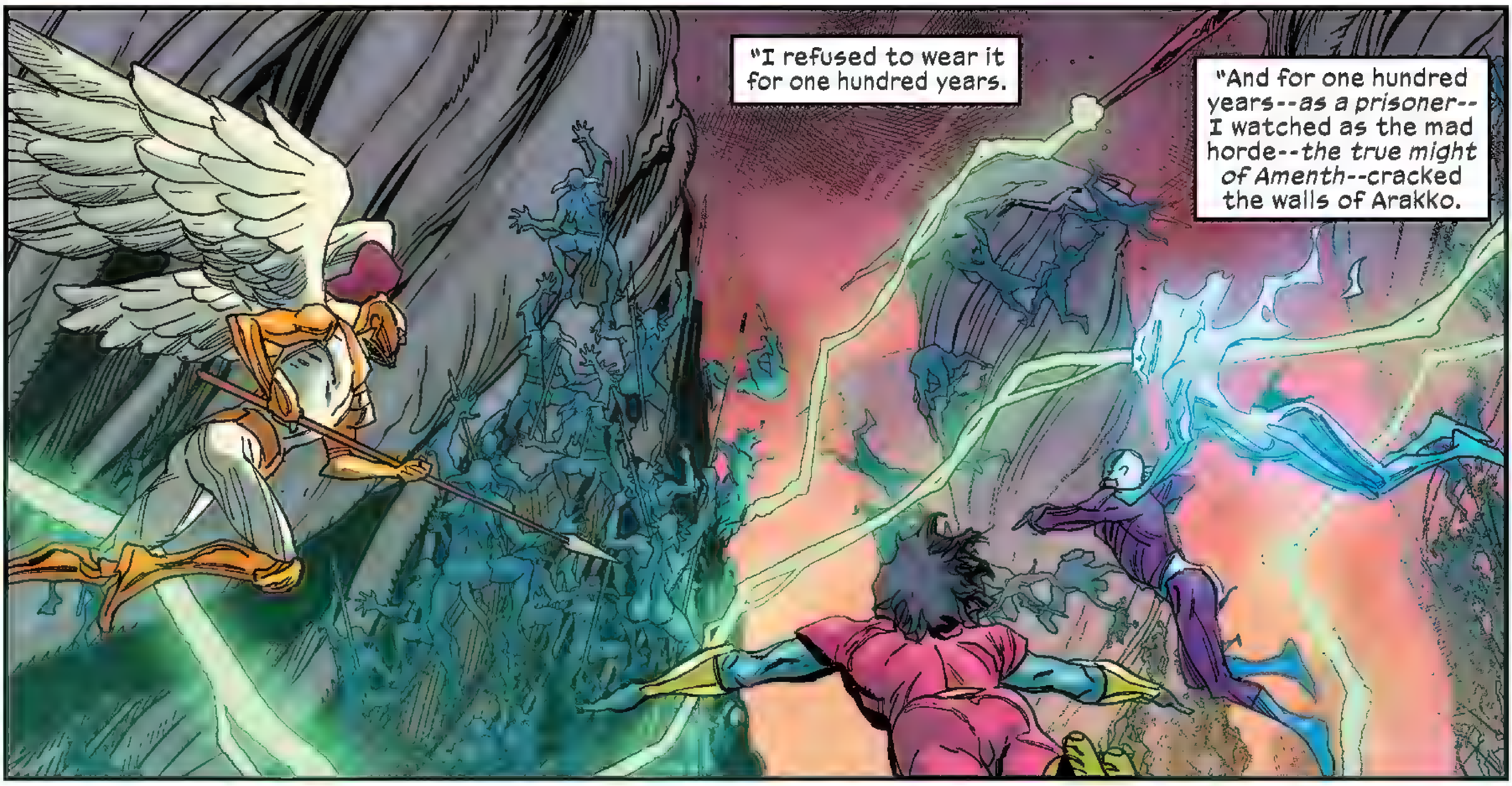

"...I have never been more wrong.
"She had been sent to invite me to parley with Annihilation at the seat of the golden helm's power. The capital city of Amenth.

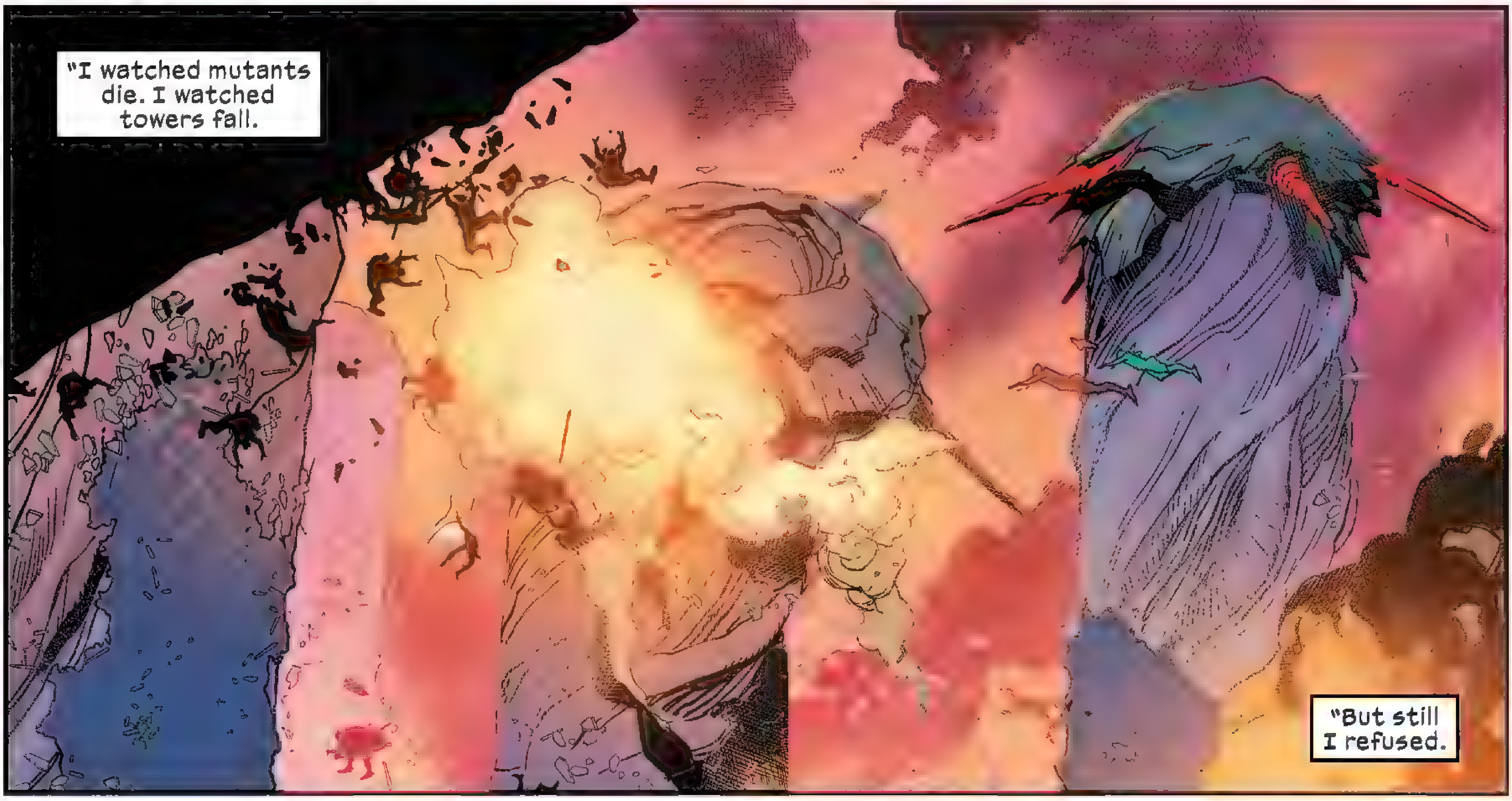

"She *begged*. I *broke*. Though it still shames me to say it.
"I told her I would hear what the golden helm had to say. I would entertain the words of *Annihilation*.

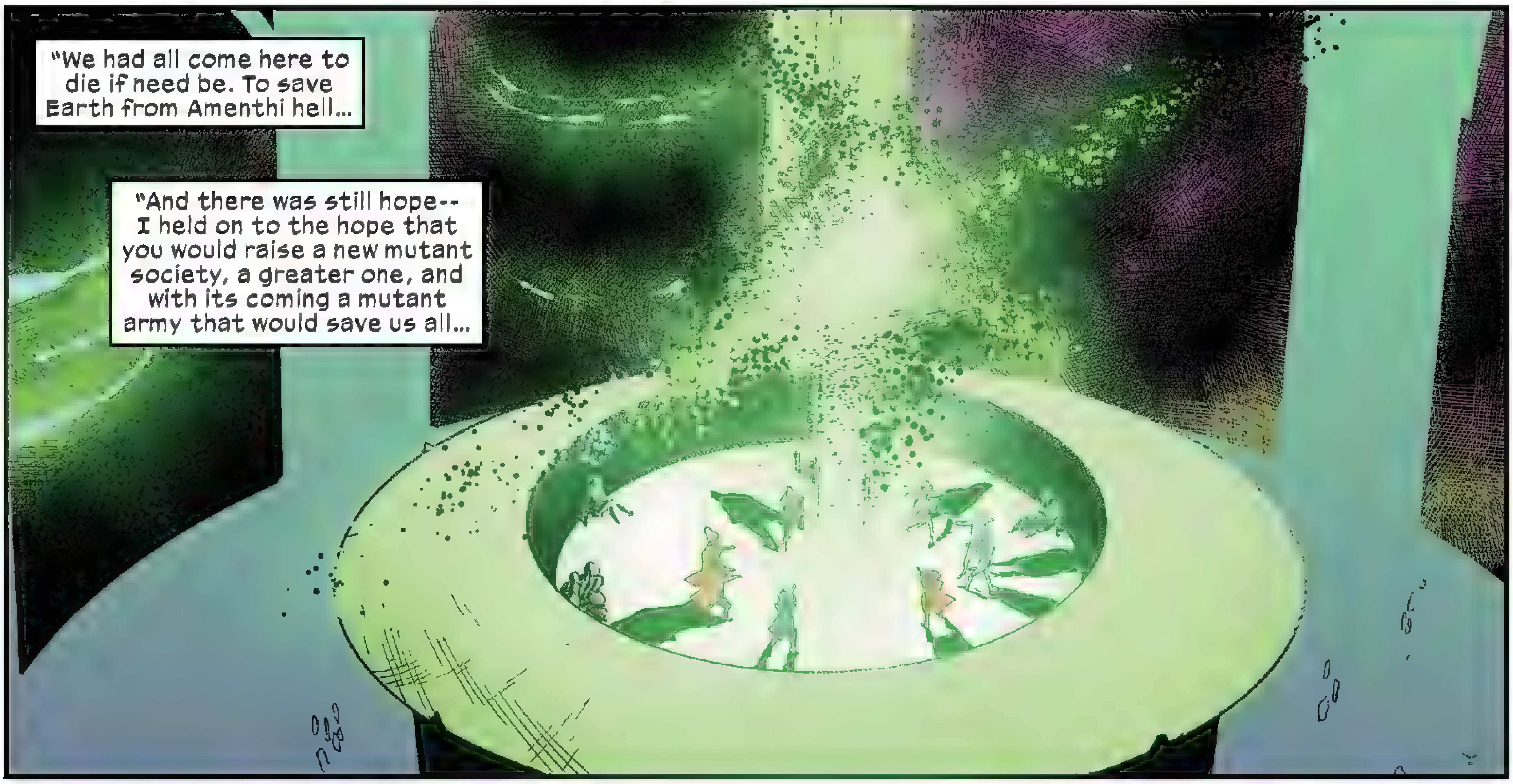
"When I entered the great hall, the words of the prophet Idyll rang in my ears and I understood that I was witnessing Arakkii doom with my own eyes.
"Those mutants who fled in the crossing-- *the one in ten of us thought lost to the wasteland*-- I found out what had happened to them.
"What we thought was thousands of years of battle with the enemy was really just them biding their time.
"Breeding the mutants they had captured with Amenthi demons to produce a hybrid warrior race...
"It was the birth of *Summoners* and the origin of the black experiments of the *vile schools.*
"I was enraged.

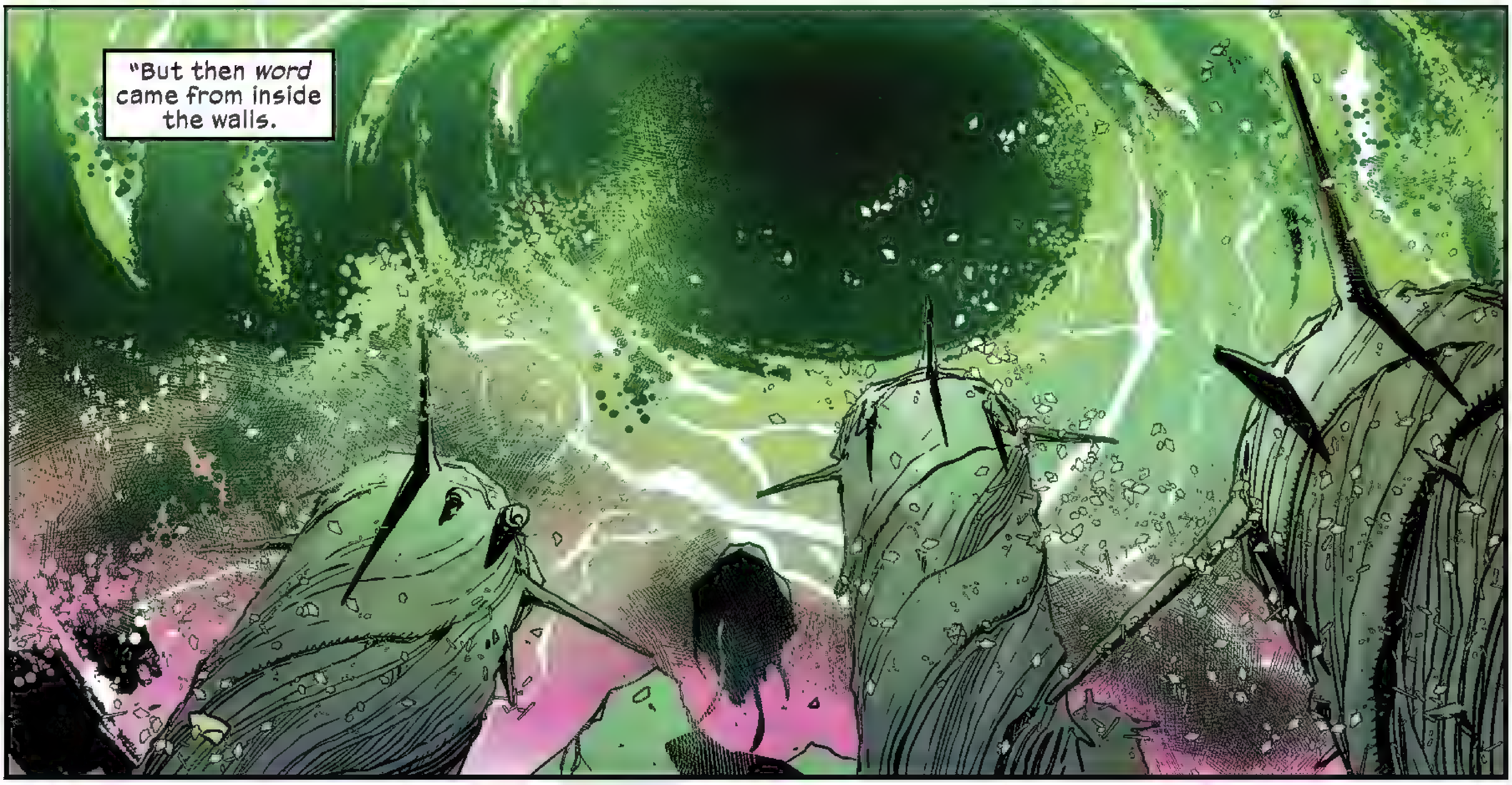
"The golden helm offered me a kind of peace. Instead, I offered Annihilation my sword.
"We battled to the death as all of Amenth looked on.
"You should have seen me, husband. I fought for us all...*and won.*
"I took her life. I took her head. And in doing so...I sacrificed my own.
"I did not know what victory *meant.* I did not know what it cost.
"Whoever defeats the helm claims the helm.
"Whoever wears that crown controls the land.

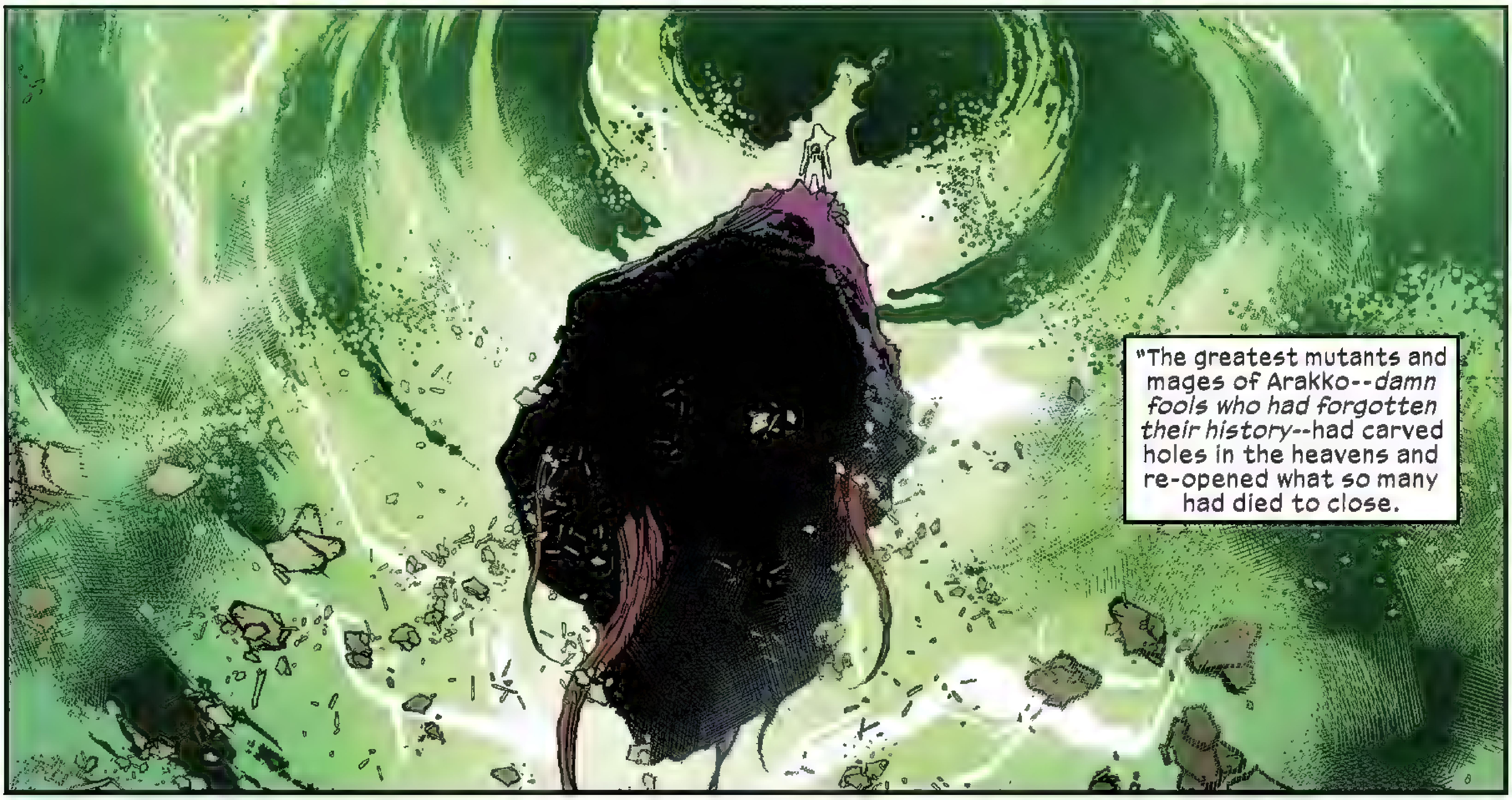

"You see, it's called Annihilation for a reason.
"The golden helm is the only thing that keeps the Amenthi horde in check. Without it, the demons of that dark world would consume everything or die trying.


"I refused to wear it for one hundred years.
"And for one hundred years--*as a prisoner*--I watched as the mad horde--*the true might of Amenth*--cracked the walls of Arakko.


"I watched mutants die. I watched towers fall.
"But still I refused.


"We had all come here to die if need be. To save Earth from Amenthi hell...
"And there was still hope--I held on to the hope that you would raise a new mutant society, a greater one, and with its coming a mutant army that would save us all...


"But then *word* came from inside the walls.


"The greatest mutants and mages of Arakko--*damn fools who had forgotten their history*--had carved holes in the heavens and re-opened what so many had died to close.

"It was a cry for help.
"It was a surrender.
"I knew then that all of the old ways were lost.
"And so I placed the golden helm on my head and surrendered to Amenth. I hoped to *control* it, to *dominate* it...but I *failed*.
"Annihilation marched the horde into Arakko.
"It surrendered to the golden helm. As did our children. As did the whole of our land.
"It wants it all. And because it wants it all...I do as well.
"So it was on to Dryador. And forward to Krakoa."

So now you know what really happened.
The price I paid...
My greatest victory...my greatest defeat.
You can fight it.
You're the strongest person I know.
No one is that strong, my love. No one.
I fight for it. And now it wants everything... so I want everything.
Most of all...
...I want Krakoa.

It's not yours to take, *my love.*
I... *We* have built something there. For all mutants.
That includes our *children*. And *you*.
But can it last? Arakko was forged in war--strong and fit, built to truly endure.
What you have made...was it with soft hands and raised on a soft earth?
I *look* at you and I *think* so.
But I will soon see what Krakoa has to *offer*...
...and what you, *my love*, have to *offer* as well.

[the__1st_law]
[the__2nd_law]

+

MAKE MORE MUTANTS

+

DESTROY OUR ENEMIES

+

DEFEND THIS BROKEN LAND

+

[the__3rd_law]
[of_arakko]

[..............X]
[..............X]

[Krakoa_0]
[Arakko_1]

THE MUTANTS OF ARAKKO

PRISONERS IN THEIR OWN LAND

[00_00]............[Alp_00]
[01_05]............[Pri_00]

When Arakko fell to the Horde of Annihilation, the millions of mutants inside its walls found themselves trapped in the vassal mutant state with no chance of escape, resistance or insurrection.

Vile school omnipaths were used to uncover militant thought, and Vile stealth suppressors were imbedded within Arakko to depower and defuse any mutant uprisings.

Abyssal prisons were constructed and manned by the Summoners of both Amenth and Arakko, the latter revealing the corruptive nature of that station and their undying allegiance not to the Golden Helm or the mutant state, but to the expansion of their own power and twisted religion.

WHAT IS TO COME

[00_00]............[Sum_00]
[06_10]............[Slv_00]

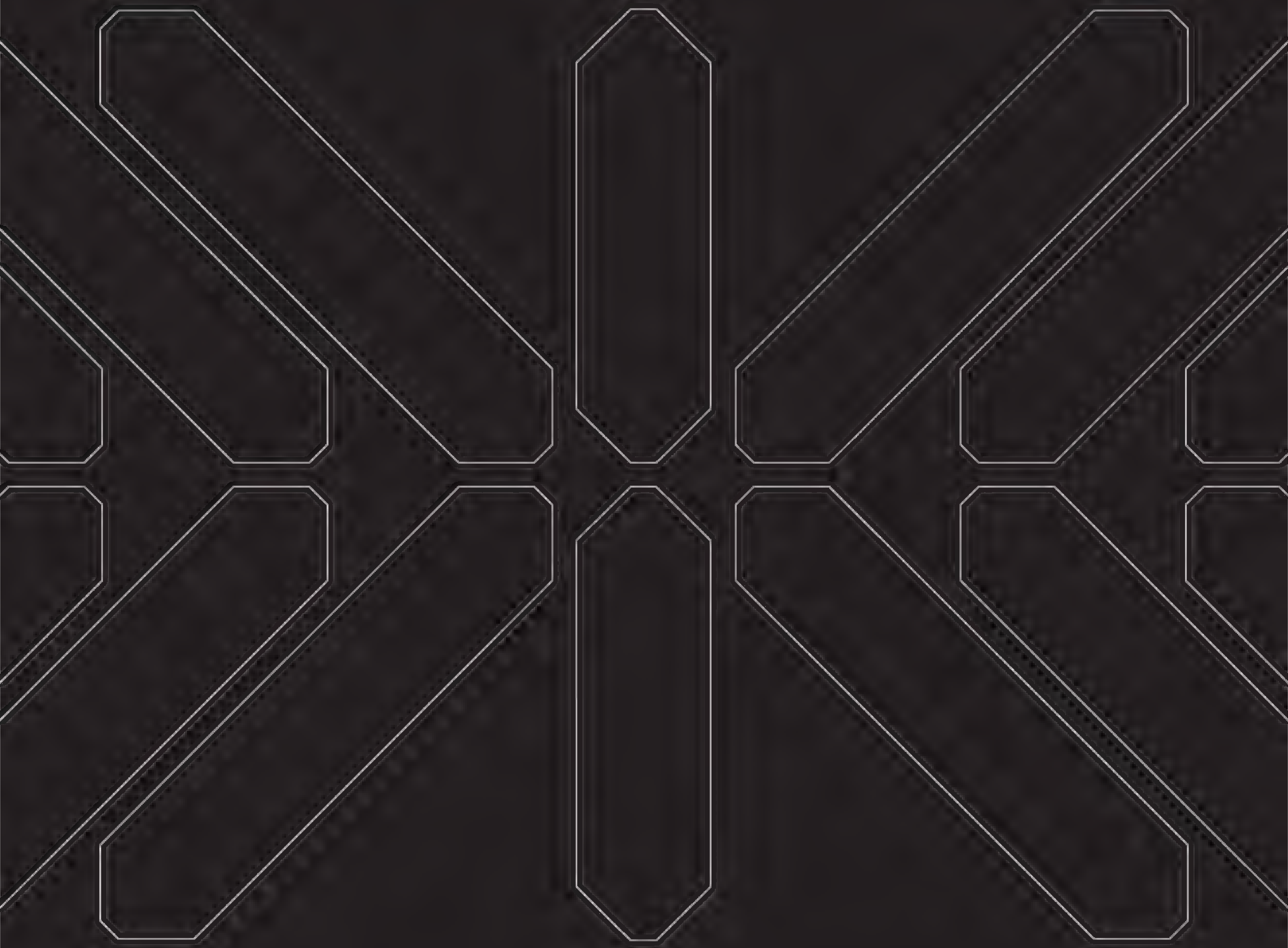
Idyll, daughter of Idyll, son of Idyll, seer of this generation, gave one last prophecy before she was silenced by a Vile engineer. The words were as follows:

[Idyll]............[Words_]

"Only under the black moon will the two become one. A white light will judge them, and a red land will see them split forever."

Make of that what you will.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

MARAUDERS #14

[XOS] [MAR14]

DUGGAN
PERCY
CASELLI
DELGADO

PART 13 OF 22

CHAPTER
13

MENU

The Swordbearers of Arakko and Krakoa are cordially invited to a state dinner in the Starlight Citadel's Hall Of Fallen Banners when the birds sing the hour of eight.

Amuse-Bouche
Ghost fig dry aged in the Crooked Market during the Devil Winds flowing from Blightspoke.

Sevalithian blood wine, fermented from the extracts of the nobles. Served in stemware harvested from the crystalline bones of lunar bats.

First Course
A sea-leaf salad harvested from the Shadow Trench and braised in the urine of Orchina, the giant squid.

Second Course
Scarabs stuffed with a cumin-spiced pharaoh brain mash in a wine reduction.

Third Course
Chef's tasting of raw delicacies originating from the Dryador Sea. Each bite is the last of its kind.

Fourth Course
The horned beast, served whole and cooked to perfection. Dry aged for three moons while being serenaded by Opal Luna Saturnyne's personal choir.

Fifth Course
Chilled crème of Neptune's glaciers with honey-drizzled fae wings.

"Eat of my bread, drink of my wine.
Before you die, together we dine."
-- Saturnyne

The Crooked Market.
Ready your orders now. Be quick, but be precise. Queen Saturnyne won't tolerate us missing so much as a single grain of salt.
Yes sir, Mister Jaspers.
I @#@$ hate parties.
Me and a lot of my friends are being fattened up for the slaughter.
The only thing I can't complain about is the booze. It'll put the wind in my sails for the nasty bit of business I gotta do tonight...

...at the witch's stupid party.
Pogg Ur-Pogg's throat is quenched--bring forth libations so it be drenched!
You are the one called Storm. I am--
I know who you are, Death.
Why waste your breath on these mutants, brother?
The Krakoans may put on a brave face, but I can smell the fear on them.
You are mistaken. It must be something else you smell.
What do you--
You are wrong, War.
This mutant does *not* fear us.

Ask her who she fears tomorrow...if she's still alive.
Heh. I thought War would be more artful.
But no--it's you.
You're going to be a problem, aren't you?
I ain't in the mood, Ororo.
Hey.
‹*Avert thy eyes, soft boy!*›

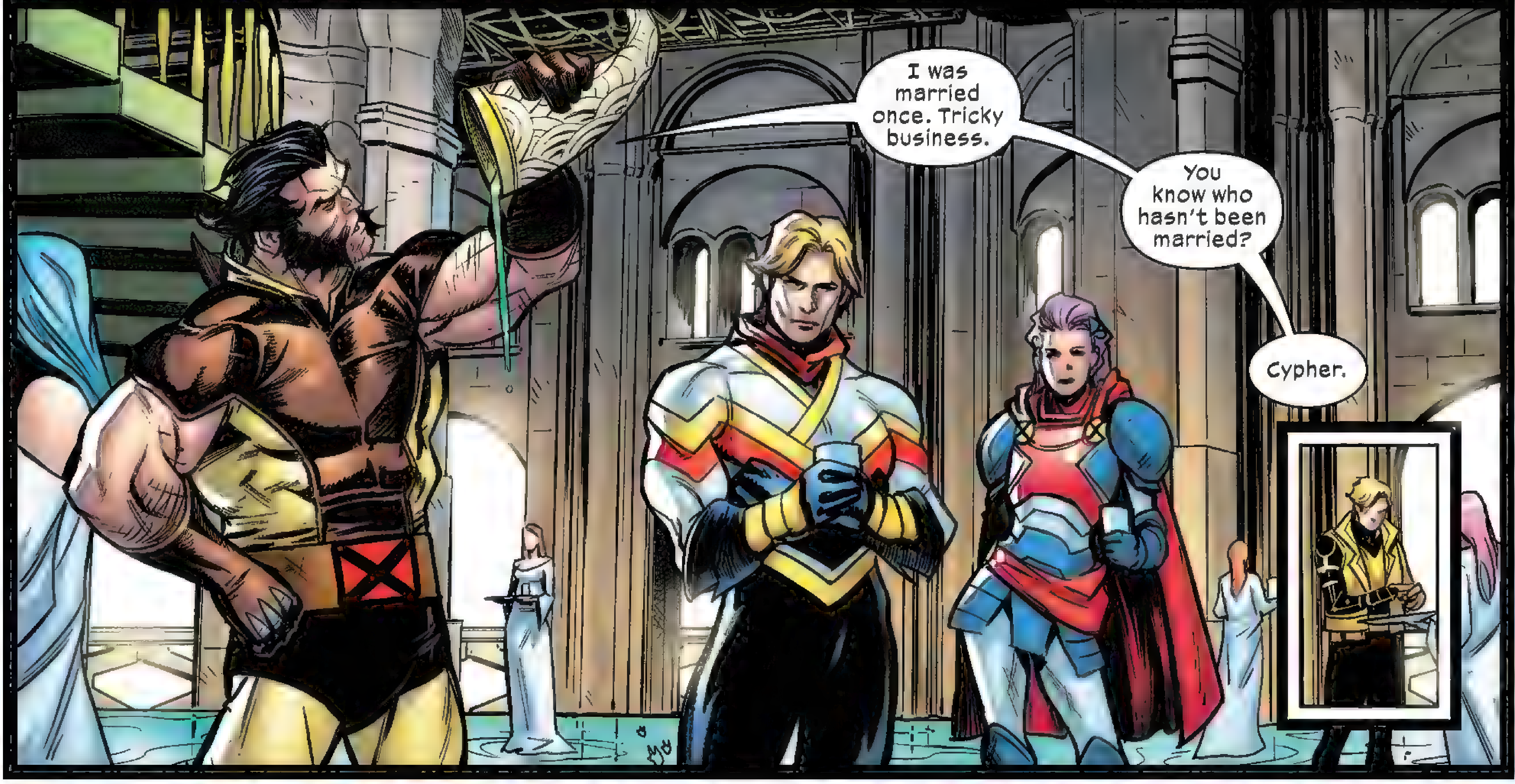
I know what you're thinking.
I know you know.
You gonna try to talk me out of it?
No.
Don't miss.
It's time!
Saturnyne bids you welcome!
To the Hall of Fallen Banners!
Please take your card.
What do I need your literature for?!

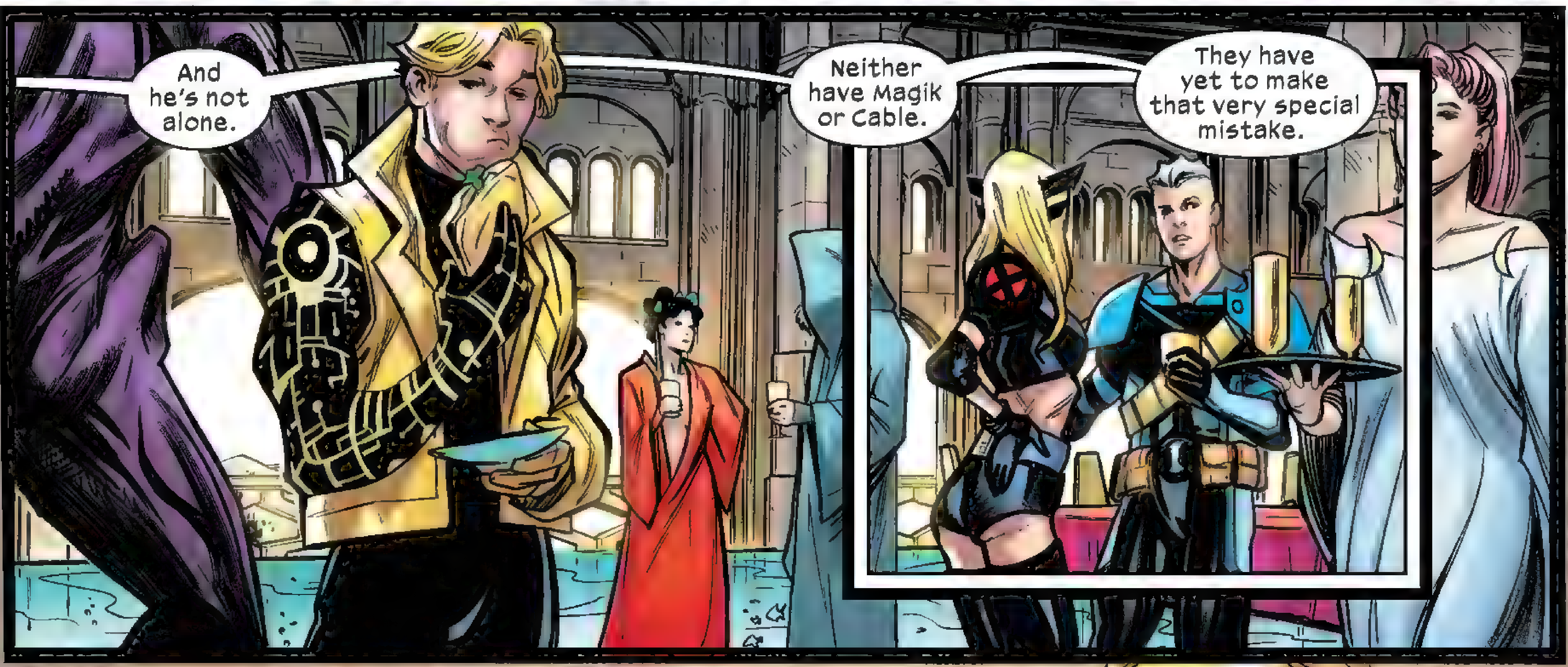
Pogg Ur-Pogg's way is blocked! Make way, lest ye be knocked!
Well, Magik Uh-Magik couldn't give a damn.
I dunno what this tarot stuff means.
Can't you just point to where my "chair of asses" is?
Th-these are your seat assignment cards.
Pogg Ur-Pogg will rest where Pogg Ur-Pogg fits best!
They don't have assigned seating at Medieval Times, and that place is nicer than this!
Working on it.
Does that beast have a soft spot?
MMPH!
He's got plenty of soft spots. Just none that are on the outside.
Hnh. Figures.
Goddess.
Mmph.
This card's not edible.
That monster is a moron.

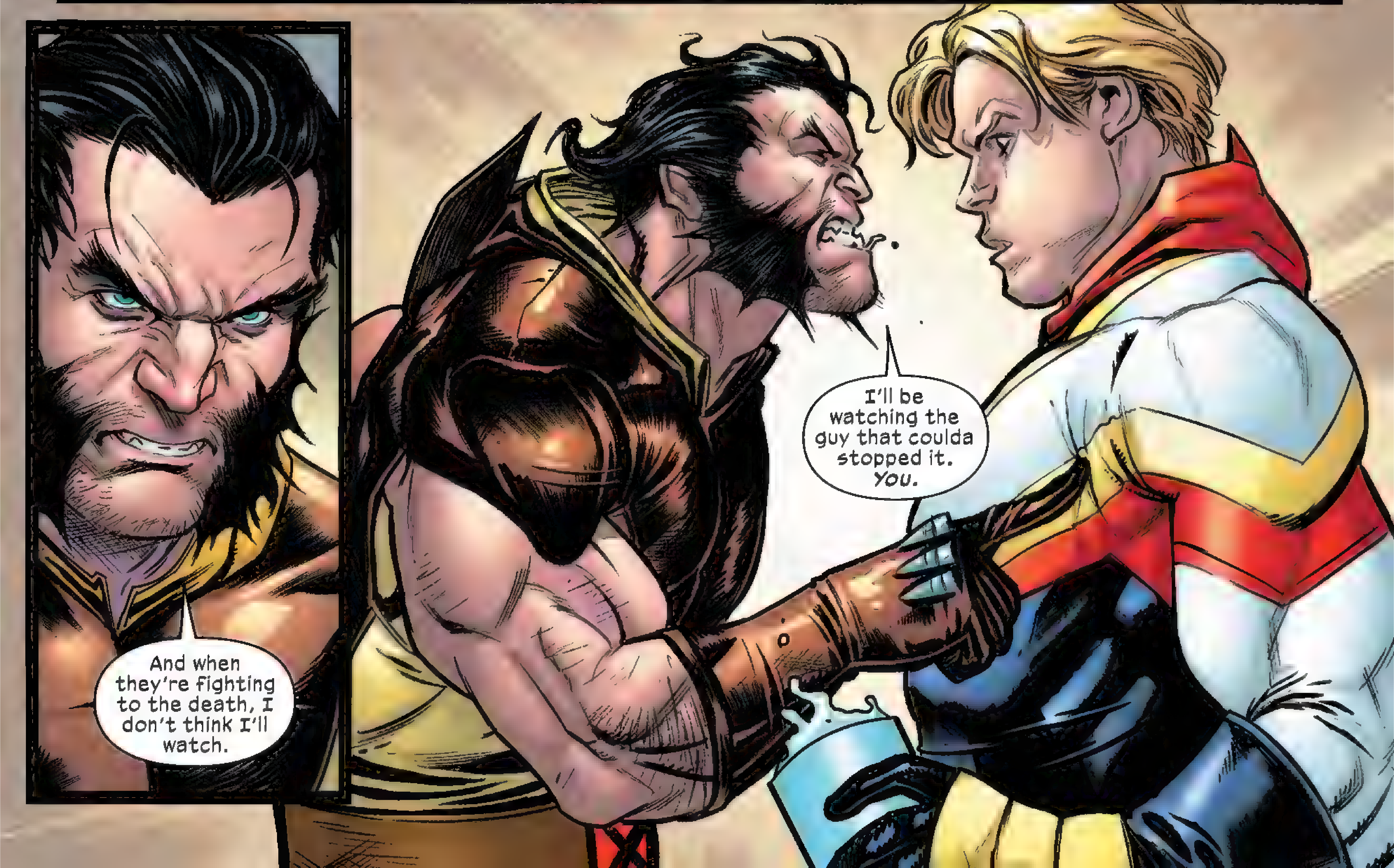
The Lady Saturnyne will now address you.
Welcome, to the *Hall of Fallen Banners.*
I am your host. Tonight the rules of parley are observed. There shall be no hostilities until the swords are drawn tomorrow.
The contests will take place across the realms of Otherworld.
It please me to introduce the swords of Krakoa and Arakko to my court...

And next, this is Jim Jaspers of the Crooked Market.
Lady Roma of the Fae.
Vesperidae, Colony Queen of Hothive.
Famine, regent of the former Kingdom of Dryador.
As we have told you, Dryador is no more. It belongs to Arakko. The first of many such conquests.
Well, you may not be welcome into Dryador, but you are always welcome in my Crooked Market, where at every turn you will find an absolutely priceless treasure, so mind your purse strings when you are our guest.
Ha.
May we dispense with the introductions? I do not wish to be here any longer than necessary.
As you wish.
Do not let the vitriol of tomorrow's contests bleed into this evening.
Blood will be shed on the morrow, but tonight is for appreciating the finer things in life.
Braddock. This is all his fault.

I trust this is a nonintoxicant?
Yes, sir.
Hey, Braddock. ‡gulp‡ You're not pulling your weight on this caper.
Death's on the horizon and mortal combat is imminent. If you have something to say, Logan, maybe just say it?
If it were me in this situation--a man who has the favor of a woman who's deciding our fate--I might be inclined to take one for the team and give the lady what she's clearly after.
...
I'm a *married* man.
Some of us take our vows seriously. Now you're being a boor, Logan. Kindly piss off.


I was married once. Tricky business.
You know who hasn't been married?
Cypher.


And he's not alone.
Neither have Magik or Cable.
They have yet to make that very special mistake.


And when they're fighting to the death, I don't think I'll watch.
I'll be watching the guy that coulda stopped it. *You.*

That witch could end this right now, if she just had what she wanted.
War is right-handed.
Yes, she is.
That chonky dinosaur is going to be a problem.
Every beast has a softness beyond its armor.
Death favors his left side.
I think Redroot's shrubbery may hide other eyes.
Interesting.
The thing I can't figure out is: Does Isca favor her right or left?
Let's find out.
Isca.

You look like you needed company.
Spare me your platitudes...
...and I will not listen to any whining that the fights won't be *fair.*
I've never been in a fair fight...they all had to face me.
You're not like the others from your island.
You look like you could take on ten swords.
A shame Krakoa doesn't have more like you.
Don't sweat us. We've got me.
A toast.

You could have just asked which hand I favor.
Ambidextrous.
Of course. Should've guessed.
Not a drop spilled.
Your turn.

There's no such thing as going low--
--with someone from Limbo.
Not a drop spilled.
Heh.
This will be *fun.*
What's *her* soft spot?
I don't know.
Kill as many as you can as fast as you can.
I fear that woman's sword will break us.

THE NOTEBOOK OF JAMES JASPERS

Reward if found, ta!

Dear Eustace, please see my remarks below. If you could send the first two entries to the appropriate parties and copy the third into my personal journal, I would appreciate it. Also, kindly set a few days aside in my calendar after this tournament so that I can have some uninterrupted time to work on my memoirs.

Note to the vintners:
The Sevalithian blood wine was not the vintage we discussed. Fortunately, no one turned their nose up at it, but I noticed. Schedule a meeting with my office to discuss recompense.

Note to the fishmongers:
The cuisine from the Shadow Trench does not ordinarily travel well, but the preparation was sublime. Eustace, send my kindest regards.

Personal Remarks:
Ah, to hear the Braddocks' accents almost makes me nostalgic for my days charting the course of history at Number 10. I wonder how our sceptered isle and her Empire are faring without me? Eustace, can you fetch some of the papers, both the broadsheets and the red-tops? It might be helpful for my writing holiday.

The Wolverine is simply a boor. I've watched him swill our finest intoxicants like a tramp guzzling cider on a park bench. I look forward to the day when he is served a measure of comeuppance instead.

Similarly, the descendants of Genesis and Apocalypse may be quite the thing on the field of battle, but conversationalists they are not. The exception is Redroot of the forest. She has rather a way with a phrase, and in many languages besides. If I could bottle her abilities, I might consider a return to politics--but alas, I suspect her side will sweep the tourney and with it, Krakoa and Earth. *Eustace, it occurs to me that--before Earth is crushed beneath the heel of these Arakkii brutes--there are some people and places I would like to save from my old home before they're razed. To that end, would you summon the glassmiths of Maadwirk to inquire about one of their special captivity chambers? Find out the largest bottle they make and what volume the interior holds. There are several pubs I should like to tuck away in the stair cupboard if possible. Ta.*

That said, if Krakoa survives this tournament (and my odds on that have dropped precipitously after sizing up their stock, but if they do), their young island-nation will doubtless go from strength to strength--with, I'm sure, planet-size repercussions.

JJ

Uh, Storm...is it me or is that bad doggy over there creeping on you?
You're not wrong.
I know what he wants.
May I?
The honor would be *mine.*
You do not fear me.
No.
Do you desire me?
Straight and to the point...

...I admire that.
The other sword bearers of your host have tasted death *many* times...
...in many ways...but not you.
You're *wrong*.
I know Death.
I meant no offense.
None taken.

I have been dancing with you my entire life...
...first as a girl living on the streets, and later as leader of the X-Men...
...a role that taught me how to sway death.
So I neither fear nor desire you, but I know you...
...and *this* is as close as I will allow you.
And now I bid my guests please sit for the first course...

My thanks to Jim Jaspers and the Crooked Market for providing this evening's delicacies.
Fate has drawn you all together, but she is not unkind.
Whatever may befall you tomorrow, you will dine like royalty this evening.
Logan, I can tell when a mind is burdened.
There's no reason for you to hold your tongue.
I ain't a man of many words...
Pray tell...
...what is it that disturbs you?

It doesn't have to be like this. You can just take what you want.
You don't need to create all this collateral damage.
I know you have a very... singular worldview, Logan. I don't expect you to understand the reasons for the many changes to come, but--
Why don't you say what you mean: There's a lot of death ahead.
I said exactly what I mean. Death is the *great* change, and *everything* dies.
Lady--
SNIKT
SNIKT

--those are some famous last words!

[mara.... [1.4]
[uders....[1.4]

I'll tell ya what joins us all--*everything dies if you can figure out how to kill it*.

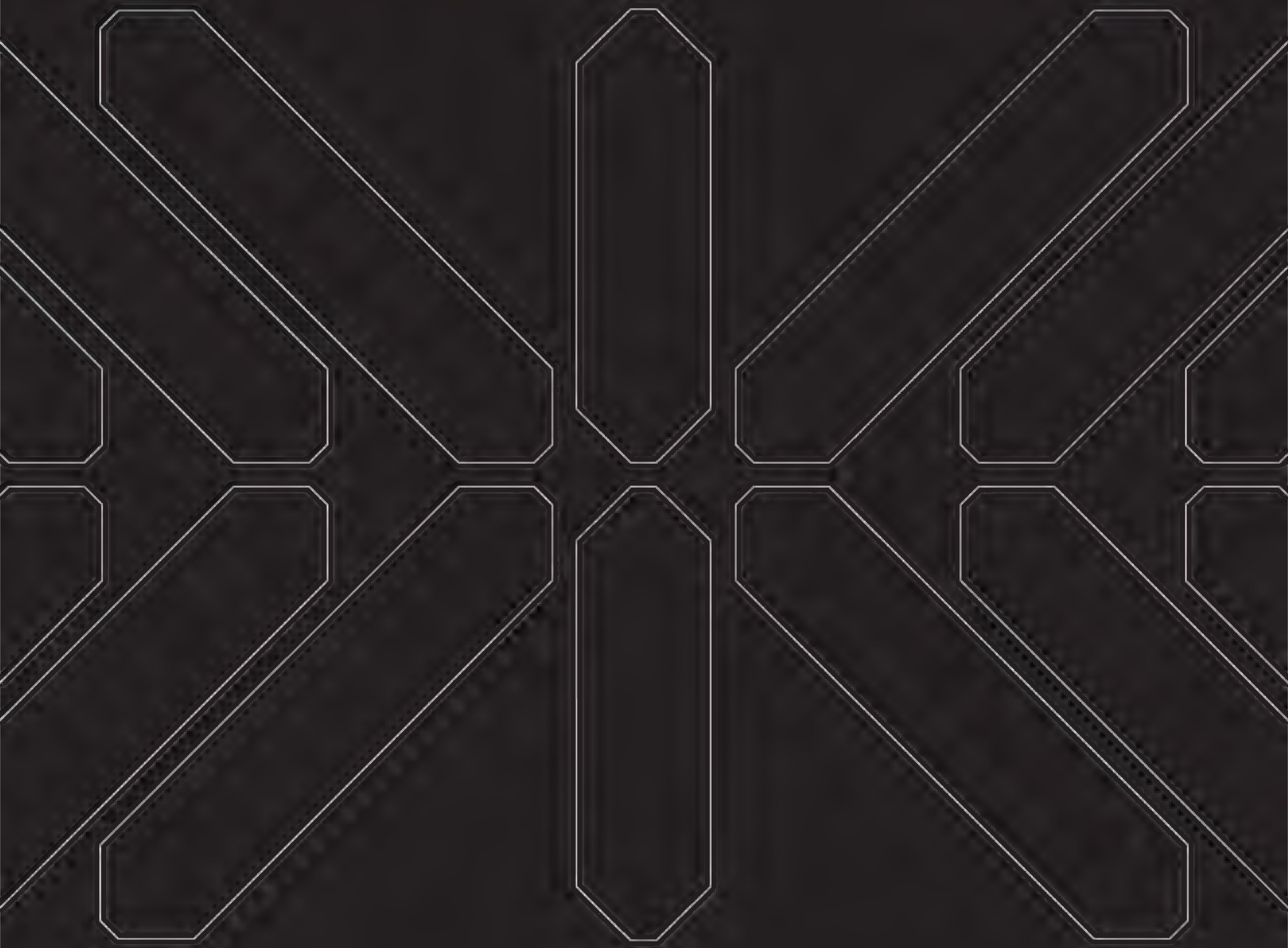
-WOLVERINE

[mara.....[1.4]
[uders....[1.4]

[xos..[1.3].....]
[xos..[1.3].....]

[marauders_14]

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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RD
MW 20

MARAUDERS #15

[XOS] [MAR15]

DUGGAN
PERCY
CASELLI
DELGADO

PART 14 OF 22

CHAPTER

14

[mara.....[1.5]
[uders....[1.5]

Every battle is won or lost before it is ever fought.

-- SUN TZU, *THE ART OF WAR*

You cannot be humbled in war if you never taste death.

-- THE WHITE SWORD
OF THE CELESTIAL SPIRE

[mara.... [1.5]
[uders... [1.5]

[xos..[1.4].....]
[xos..[1.4]... .]

[marauders_15]

X-MEN X OF SWORDS

After Logan murdered Saturnyne in her own home, chaos erupted.

A fierce three-way battle between the forces of Saturnyne, Krakoa and Arakko sent the Starlight Citadel plummeting from the clouds. Magik managed to teleport the Krakoans home as the cacophony of the palace shattering below reverberated in their ears.

With the External Gate closed, arguments began anew in the Quiet Council about what, if anything, was owed to Otherworld. It was a short row as the External Gate ruptured with the full fury of battle-hardened Arakkii warriors. They had already brought Amenth to heel, and now the campaign for Earth had commenced on Krakoa.

For three days and nights the mutants waged war upon each other. The Arakkii were reinforced constantly from the gate…but the Krakoans did not have their number. Tens of thousands of mutants were slaughtered before a call for help was made.

A telepathic mind bomb was hauled through the gate and detonated. Hundreds of mutants' higher brain functions were erased from their brains…including Moira X in her No-Place.

Krakoa issued a distress call that was answered by Earth's Mightiest Heroes: the Avengers, the Fantastic Four and the hosts of Asgard, who all fought…and lost.

The mountains of corpses turned the waters around Krakoa red, and as the island burned alive one mutant witnessed the end of the dream…one mutant watched as Apocalypse was decapitated, drawn and quartered.

The Wolverine saw it all with deathless eyes.

Wolverine

With Saturnyne dead there was no contest...
ONE
...and there was no defense from the Arakkii in Otherworld.
Otherworld fell quickly, and then it was on to Earth...and even its mightiest heroes were no match for the invaders.
To the victor go the spoils.

And what is the final fate of Krakoa's deathless man?
AAARGH!
Turnabout is fair play, right, Logan?
Hmm. Stabbing is kind of *fun.*
Your head will never wear a crown, Logan... but I know you care deeply for your people, so despite the harm you intended me, I freely give you this *gift.*
This glimpse of the future. This is what happens...
...if you fail your people.
SNAKT

How the hell--?!
Now why don't you sit back down before your food gets cold...
...or I will banish you to a lifeless realm.
Logan?
It didn't happen. Just-- forget it.
I didn't think you'd mind if I batted cleanup on your sushi app. It's exquisite.
I don't give a rat's ass...
SNFF
...what the hell is that?
SNFF

Stop!
Mmph.
ACKKCCUK
Our first course is--
Somebody poisoned my appetizer!
Why don't we give you a moment.
Ughn.

Hang on, kid.
His throat is closing-- he can't breathe.
A second airway for the boy.
I coulda done that.
Then why didn't you?
We need to get him home *now*.

You poisoned a *boy.*
At a feast.
Back off!
Tsk. Is he alive?
He's fading.
It should have been the Wolverine.
There is far too much at stake to let our fates be decided by the crossing of swords, and that little monster is... will be our great *impediment.*
They only call you "unbeatable" 'cause you've *never* faced me.
And you-- send us back to Krakoa NOW!
Surely you don't intend to ***forfeit*** after the gift I just gave you?
Not all of us have a hundred soldiers enslaved to our service...
...we all make war in our own way.
Poison. The weapon of the craven...
...and the White Sword will not be party to cowardice.
There's a reason the tower never fell.

Be healed, boy.
-Gasp!-
You are whole, Cypher, Sword of Krakoa...
...and I release you from any obligation to me.
I see you did well with the children.
I did my best.

Pogg Ur-Pogg will--
Saturnyne, may I petition you?
If you had anything to do with this, I'll--
This is disgraceful.
A shame. I was enjoying dinner.
I'd rather just get on with it.
Of course you may. One moment.
SNAP
You have my complete and undivided attention, Brian.
Thank you. Clearly the Arakkii have violated your invitation and sought to win by cheating.
I would request that you set aside their claim, declare Krakoa the winner by forfeit and send the Arakkii on their way.
There is fairness in your suggestion, and I would move to vacate their claim...
...however, the Krakoans also sought to commit murder this evening. They attempted to slay *me*.
...
Damn that pigheaded dwarf.

Heard that, Braddock.
I'm impressed, Wolverine.
Truly, I am. I didn't even *consider* an attack on the Majestrix.
I just wanna get my people home safe.
The singular desire of every brave soldier.
I'm afraid we really must serve the next course. Please take your seats.
We hope you enjoy these scarabs stuffed with the hearts of polinae from the rivers of Wuhave, cooked to perfection in a reduction of the greatest wines from Sevalith.

You...dare serve me this sacred beetle?
I did not see any vegetarian requests, and--
W-where is the sacred scarab?
Over here, bub.
You didn't seem like you wanted it...
...and you can't -munch- let food go to waste.

I didn't know what Logan intended, but--
Of course not. And I, too, am sorry that I couldn't grant your request...
Still, perhaps some accommodations could be made if you were to lift the *right* sword and reclaim the mantle you were destined for.
Forgive me, but that is my past, Saturnyne.
I trust you won't go to bits.
No. Not I.
Are-- are those real?
Bloody hell.
Wonderful. The main course has arrived.

Served for only the second time in the Hall of Fallen Banners--the great horned beast!
I never eat, for I am beyond hunger.
But for the great unicorn... I will make an exception.
Let the goddess take me before I ever--
It's good.
Damn, damn good.

I've never seen the White Sword snatch a soul from death and fail to conscript them into his army.
Well, I've never been asked to carry the shame of a poisoning at a parley.
The boy doesn't know how lucky he is. It's one thing to die. It's another to be eternal fodder for *your* battles.
Lifting a sword is a small price for eternal life.
I don't plan to die for a long time, but I only intend to do it *once*.
If there's one thing that truly bores me, it is listening to others plan for their eventual deaths.
Tell me, White Sword. Would you be able to resurrect yourself?
Ha.
I have no idea, and I'll *never* know.

So...
...this has to be weird for you guys.
"Weird" is a *human* word, Cable. Used to describe a reality that their small minds fail to grasp.
You'll understand that in time...
...when you have more experience.

OTHERWORLD TOURNAMENT OPENING LINE

Odds of survival calculated by J. Jaspers

1	Annihilation	3-1
2	Apocalypse	5-1
3	Bei the Blood Moon	10-1
4	Cable	100-1
5	Captain Avalon	30-1
6	Captain Britain	30-1
7	Cypher	5000-1
8	Death	50-1
9	Gorgon	20-1
10	Isca the Unbeaten	2-1
11	Magik	50-1
12	Pogg Ur-Pogg	20-1
13	Redroot the Forest	100-1
14	Solem	40-1
15	Storm	50-1
16	Summoner	40-1
17	The White Sword of the Celestial Spire	6-1
18	War	50-1
19	Wolverine	20-1

To place a wager, contact the Crooked Market Wager House.
Odds as stated honored only up to the start of the first battle.

JJ

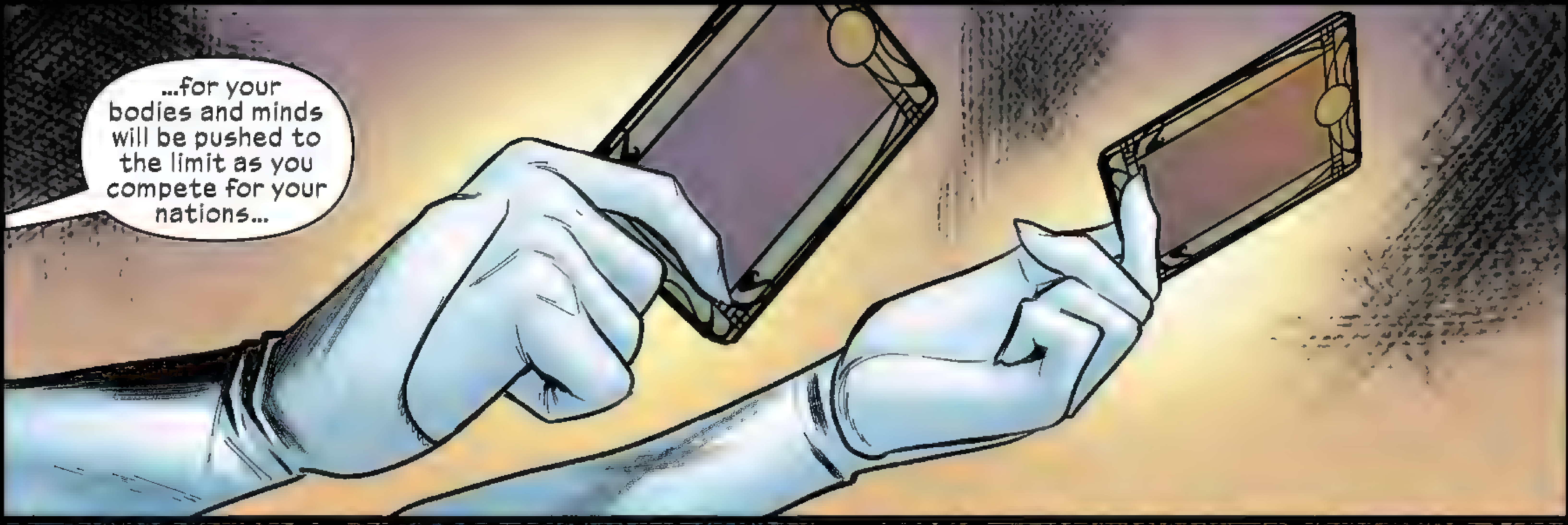
You're Isca, right?
I am.
And your power is you can't be beaten?
Never have.
Never will.
That's so cool. Can you show me?
You will witness my power tomorrow.
I thought we were all gonna be dead tomorrow? Let's see you go now. I got a few ideas.

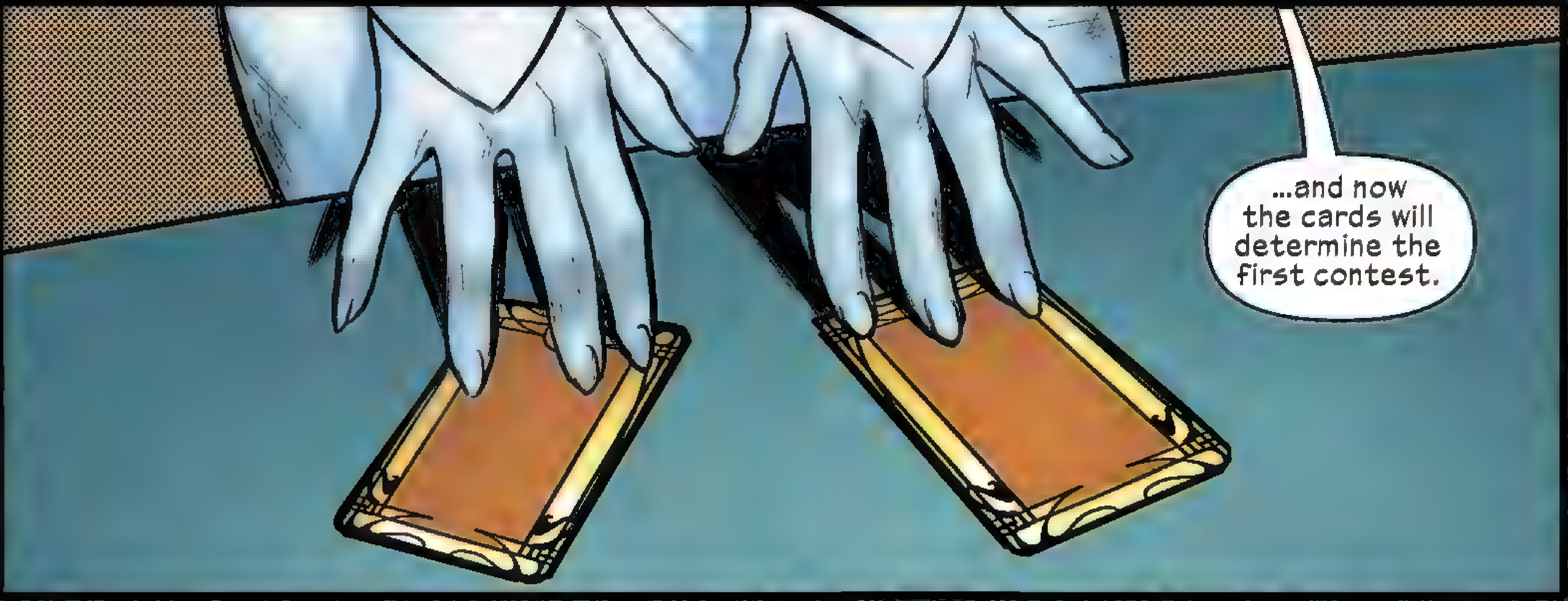
Soon...
Not much of a test, and Pogg Ur-Pogg already had a tail.
Now do Logan.
And...
Done.
SKRASHK
Ow.
@#$%.

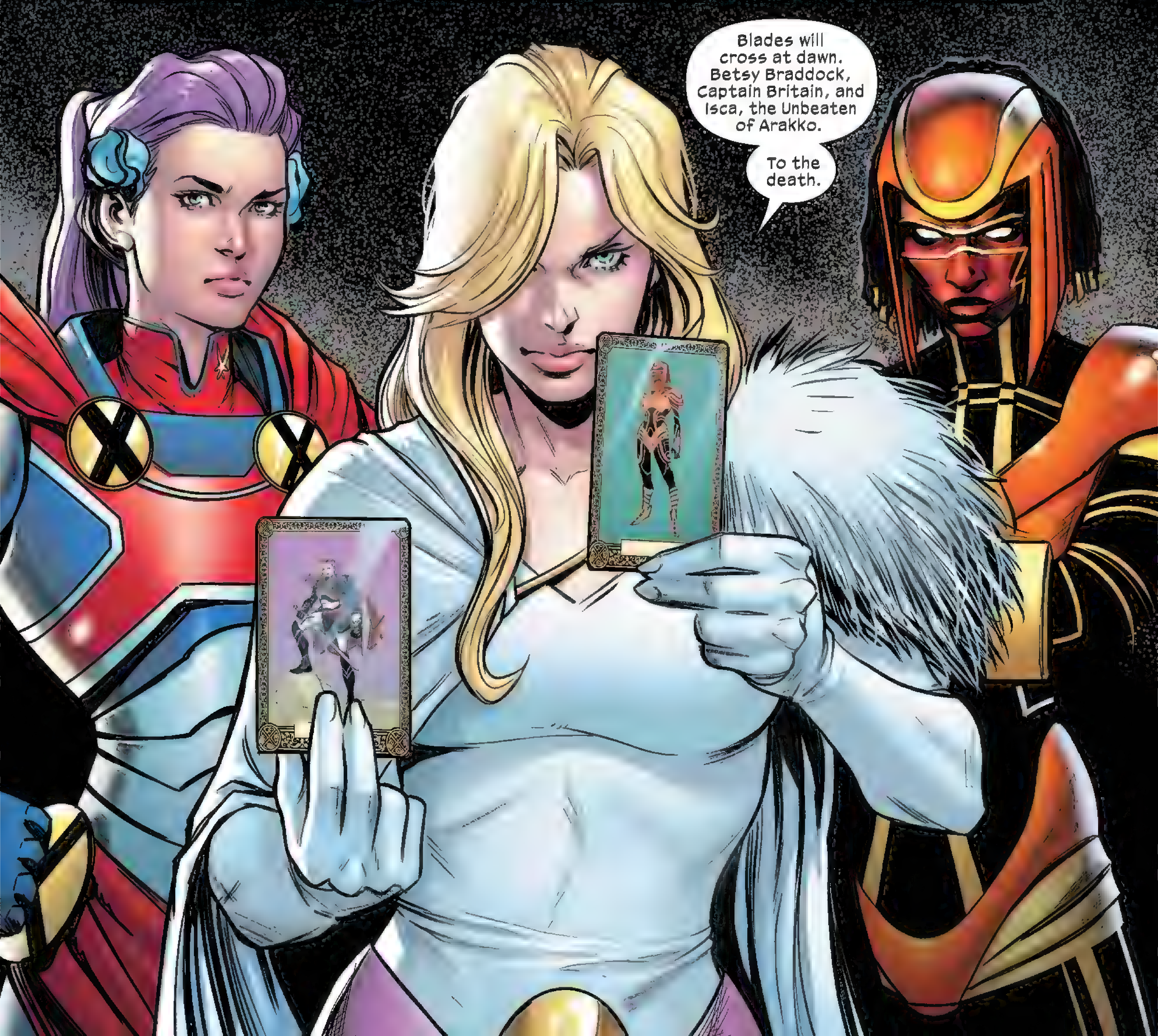
And finally...
Okay, which one is it under now?
She nailed it.
You've *never* lost?!
At *anything?!*
Guess what number I'm thinking of?
You're not thinking of a number.
She's right!
Imagine what would happen if she fought Domino?
Your friend would lose.
I'm not looking forward to fighting you.
Hnnh.
You may live to a ripe old age, after all.

Our enemies are so...weak and soft.
Your words ring true on the wind, but...we look at them and wonder...
About *what?*
They are coddled. *Unfit.*
Or perhaps these mutants were grown on a better world than ours.
If we had set roots on Krakoa, we would have grown in the sun, and--
Set aside such thoughts.
Do not attach yourselves to these weak things, Redroot. We will cull them come the dawn.

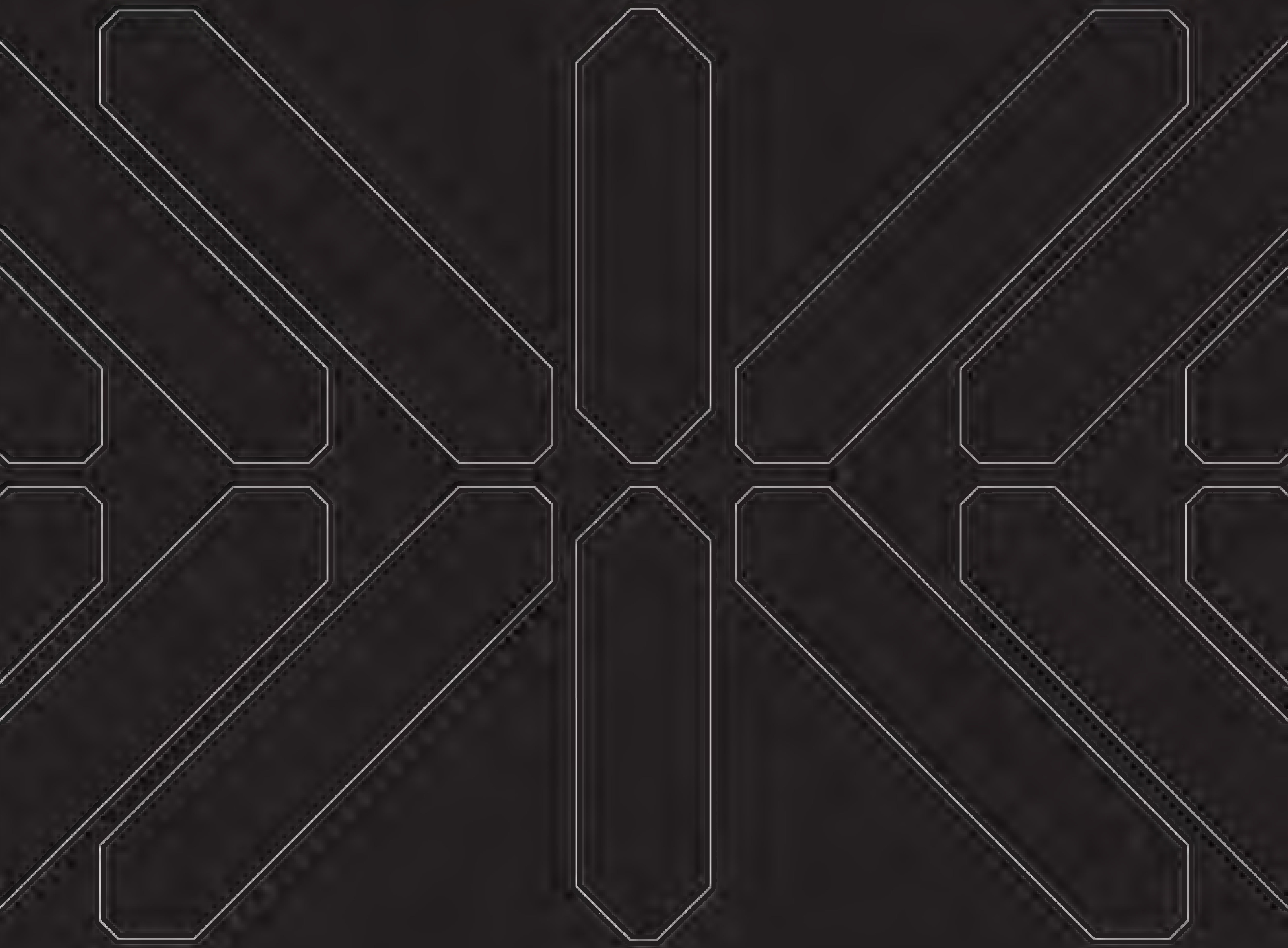
...and I saw our entire world burn.
We have the power to stop it--and we will.
We better have a plan if the score ain't in our favor.
Swordbearers and honored guests, thank you for joining us this evening.
I hope you have enjoyed my hospitality.
You have all dined well, now you must return to your chambers and sleep well...


...for your bodies and minds will be pushed to the limit as you compete for your nations...


...and now the cards will determine the first contest.


Blades will cross at dawn. Betsy Braddock, Captain Britain, and Isca, the Unbeaten of Arakko.
To the death.

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[00_Unite______]

M. ASRAR
MW

EXCALIBUR #14

[XOS] [EX14]

HOWARD
NOTO

PART 15 OF 22

CHAPTER

15

[excal [0.14]
[ibur_[0.14]

Find the most fearsome challenger in all of creation and make her your wife. Lie down at night beside your greatest threat. Make love to your fate.

--APOCALYPSE

[excal [0.X]
[ibur_[0.X]

[excal_[0.14].....]
[ibur_[0.14].....]

[XOS . . . .[014]_Excalibur]

Otherworld. The Forgiven Forest, Avalon.
Base camp of the Priestesses of the Green.
Jubilee?
I know it's early. Are you awake?
I don't have much time.
There's going to be a duel. I wanted you and Shogo to know in case--
Betsy?! A duel?
I'm awake. I'm awake!
There you are. I *do* hope Shogo is healing all right.
Who are you dueling? What's going on?
Betsy, if I don't hear from you by *noon*--
No, you need to stay *far away* from the citadel right now. There's--
There's *what?* What's going on at the citadel?
What the hell is all *that* about?!
Sorry, love, time to go.

Someone's here to see me.
Can I help you?
I don't think I'm the one that needs help, Betsy Braddock.
Nine of Swords? An ill omen. It isn't too late for you to forfeit the duel and avoid *certain* death.
But if you *are* going to fight, don't humiliate yourself out there.
Are you *joking?*
Get away from me.
I was just giving some friendly advice.
Unbeaten isn't just a *name.*
That sword you carry, it's called *Mercy,* is it?
Don't get excited.
That one *is* just a name.

HAAAA
HAHAAAA
...Anyway, that's enough about the Lady Saturnyne. I hope her little tourney goes very well. And I'm honored to help host it today.
And with *that,* my *loyal and beloved subjects!*
You could be anywhere else in Avalon today but you have chosen to be *here,* to witness a good old-fashioned *duel!* The terms are to the death--so don't get attached.
With that, please welcome our combatants:
My own *dear sister,* Betsy Braddock of Krakoa, *Captain Britain!*
And dueling for Arakko...*Isca the Unbeaten!*
Well, let's see about changing that, shall we?
#@*$ her up, Captain!
Attagirl, Bets!
You watchin', Dougie? You might learn something--Betsy's a *pro* with a sword.
I'm watching.

Commence!
Yee-eeaah!
Destroy her!
WHAM
She's got this in the bag!
This is going to require some cleverness from Captain Britain.
While I have come to trust the heart and passion of the young, Isca has had the benefit of *time.* Her skills are honed by centuries.
Yeah, yeah, just holler for the lady!
Hnh. Good.
Oooooo...
You listened!
Yeeeeaah!

WHAK!
YAAAAHHH!
Bring me her head!
Can't lose?
Just means you never learned how to fight.
OMM
That's where you're wrong.
Come on, then!
Don't you want to give them a good show?!
Nyyaahh!
KRAK
No!
It's breaking, something's breaking--

TSSHHH
I'm breaking --!
Betsy!
The hell's goin' on?!
To the Unbeaten.
Hnh...hnn... heh...
Oh dear.
Is the duel over already?

What a shame. I was too late.
Point-- Arakko. Clearly.
Now let the priestesses handle this mess and you all head back to the citadel. We've got a party to plan for.
You greedy witch, you're meddling in your own games!
What have you done to my sister?!
I haven't done anything! She lost!
So she's dead. They'll bring her back, darling.
...Oh. Except I suppose they can't if she dies here...
I will kill you--
Okay, settle down, Big Ben. I tried that already. We're not gonna do that again no matter how mad we get.
This...party you threaten. Is it a challenge? Speak plainly.
Oh, it'll be a challenge, all right.
Your little friend here had better make sure he speaks every language.
And quick.
My card!
Guys?!

[Capt...Brit]
[00..AVALON]

The Crooked Caller, your one-stop shop for the pages that don't go in your spell book! With your guide to tournaments, gossip and hot deals, don't go around the Crooked Market without the Caller!

CAPTAIN BRITAIN LOSES IN STUNNING UPSET, CITIZENS OF AVALON FURIOUS

Suddenly, it seems like tournament season is in full swing in the lands around the Starlight Citadel! Fans packed the grounds, flagons in hand, eager to see the first duel of the tourney, the hometown favorite **CAPTAIN BRITAIN** against the challenger **ISCA**, the **UNBEATEN**.

In a stunning upset, Isca dominated the fight, proving that her moniker is more than merely a name. Captain Britain proved to be both agile and strong, but it was a quick parry that shattered her weapon and brought about her defeat.

Fans are still unsure as to what they witnessed -- the grounds were cleared shortly thereafter, and the "remains" of the Captain remanded to Lady Saturnyne. Reports are varied, but one thing is for sure: it was shocking. Local duel fan Edelbert Boggantruffle was quoted as saying there was a "shatterin'! Like a stained-glass window it was! Just one strike to 'her sword and the Captain was in pieces! Smithereens, I say!"

In addition to the heartbreak of their loss, the people of Avalon find themselves with empty pockets after eagerly betting on their favorite. One local winner? King Jamie Braddock himself, who bet on Isca with 100-1 odds and finds himself with rich returns.

"I didn't want to have to mourn my sister *and* be out good coin," his Majesty was said to say. "I'm dreadfully heartbroken by her disappearance, and if she returns to us I promise to buy her something very nice."

Hehe, come along!
Hey, let go of me!
Where are you taking me?!
Guys, help!
He will be returned to you in due time.
But...changed. Irrevocably.
I don't want to die!
We have not even mourned Betsy and we are losing Cypher!
We must do something!
RRRRRAAAAHHH!
‹Unhand me, maidservants.›
Is that who I have to fight?!
What's she saying?!
I...
...can't understand her!

‹Fools!›
Can anyone else understand her?!
Farewell, brave combatants.
‹I will paint their tombstones with their blood.›
Nothing. That's fascinating.
I can understand the *others*--
--but not you.
I've never seen anything like it. Say something else?
‹Do not shine the light of your sweet face on me and expect pity!›
Wait, I want to understand her!
You had me worried Betsy would simply be *humiliated*, not *destroyed*.
And now they've dragged poor Douglas off for the kill.
I do not know why you would have ever thought this journey would be without *sacrifice*, Captain Avalon. Some of us will return home changed.
Some of us will not return home.

[Bei...BloodMoon]
[00..DOOMNOTE]

BEI THE BLOOD MOON - DATA FILE

Arakko-born, Bei the Blood Moon was raised a warrior. For the first fifty years of her life, she never spoke a word.

On the day she chose to speak, she leveled a mountain with the sound of her voice. Whatever order she cried out was lost, the first words of a long-silent commander buried under an avalanche, her own warriors lost beneath the rubble.

Since then, she has not only learned the danger of her gift, but its very practical applications. Bei's **DOOM NOTE** lies deep within her broad chest, reverberating in her voice when she speaks. Bei can use the **DOOM NOTE** as needed to create loud concussive force blasts, but in addition to its combat utility, the **DOOM NOTE** contains other strange properties.

Perhaps as a result of being silent for so long, the **DOOM NOTE** of Bei's voice inherently seeks to be understood, a strange sort of near-psychic connection that typically makes her understood by all who hear her speak.

However, the **DOOM NOTE** seems to interact with the powerset of Cypher (Douglas Ramsey) in a unique way -- while the **DOOM NOTE**'s desire to be understood can make it heard, her words are not a true language and cannot be translated.

hehehe
I wish one of you nice ladies would just talk to me.
I'm really good at talking, but it only works when other people talk *back*.
hehehe
Can you just tell me when to get out my sword?
Can I get a few minutes to practice with it first? I wasn't sure I'd be called on *immediately* after another duel like that.
You know, I feel kinda like I'm being *dressed for the slaughter!*
hehe
I don't like the giggles--this isn't funny!
Aw, that's not true.
I think you look cute like that. And I *need* something to laugh about.
Magik! Thank God you're here. I don't know why they're dressing me up!
I can't fight in this!
You can't fight at *all*.
What are you all doing down there--what's going on?!
We're all still kind of in shock.
About Betsy.
Is she for real gone?
We don't know!
Am I gonna die?!

I don't know, Doug! No one does, but all of a sudden it seems very possible!
So what did you come to tell me?!
I came to see if you were okay!
And it seems like you're getting a makeover so I guess I'll go.
I'm sorry, I'm panicking. Tell me what you know.
Brian is pretty inconsolable. As is everyone else.
I left them...mingling with the Arakkii some more. But no one feels friendly toward Isca.
Someone set up a bar. They're making cocktails.
It doesn't really look like another duel. Maybe more dinner?
Dinner?!
Bei is gonna hunt me for sport and serve me. Or I'm going to serve her!
I really don't think that's it, Doug.
I mean, a cannibal slaughter? They brought in a cake.
They brought...
...a cake?
Oh my god. Illyana. Bei isn't gonna kill me--

Welcome, Douglas.
We were worried you might leave your *bride* at the altar.
--she's going to *marry* me!
Okay, uh, *good luck.* You need "*the talk*"?
I mean, *I'm* all *self-taught,* but I'll do my best--
No, no, I can *do* this--

Wow. I'm so happy to not have to fight you, I could *kiss* you.
Heh. Well. I guess I am going to kiss you, right?
Hoo boy.
He looks *relieved.*
Yeah, 'cause he can't *understand* her.
This is *hell* next to a quick *death.*
Hm. Hmm-hmm-hmm. Hahahaa...
If you would now share your vows with the gathered, Cypher.
Oh, I don't have anything prepared.
I'm not even prepared.
Get creative, young man. I hear you're a fast talker.
Uhh...
Bei the Blood Moon.
This is a little bit absurd, 'cause I don't know anything about you, but you're going to be my wife.
So I swear to uphold my vow to you for the duration of this challenge, or whatever. And I'll always be *grateful* that we got to do this instead of sword fight, because I'm *not ready to die.*
Okay. Your turn.
‹When the grim fog of bloodshed overtakes us, the beloved is the beacon that returns us to our better selves.›
‹Love is a fealty that cannot be broken.›
‹I will love you with the force of the wave that crashes the shore and fight for you like the current that swallows the sand.›
You guys can understand her, yeah?
They are good vows, Douglas. You should accept them.

Yeah, I, uh. I do. I can't even understand her. She's...
...fascinating.
Glad you think so.
You may kiss the bride.
Oh, we don't have to do that. We hardly know each other, and I...
...didn't want to...
Uh...
...I forgot.
You're so... pretty.
EEEEEEEEEEE
Look out!
BADOOOOOM
BABOOOOOOM

What's up, citadel?!
I finished my lunch and Captain Britain didn't call me back, so here we are. We have a buddy system.
Roooooo!
Jubilee and Shogo--what are they doing here?
I'm scanning her thoughts.
It seems she has been sequestered in the exterior camp with her son. She merely knows Betsy had a duel and then Betsy stopped responding.
So she's gonna have her baby--that dragon--burn the damn place down?
Good kid.
Not quite. Shogo's dragon fire melts the very fabric of reality.
It killing us would be among the least of what it can do.
I will go to her.
If she will not reason with your telepathy, I will see her face-to-face.

Bei, are you okay?
What are you doing?
You're going out there?
What are you going to do, *fight* Saturnyne? Fight the *dragon?* Bei, he's a *baby,* you can't--
Please, don't.
I don't know if you can understand me, and I can't understand you, and that's *crazy,* for reasons you can't *begin* to understand.
I've never had anyone be this kind of a fascinating mystery to me like you are. I have to *concentrate* to figure you out and even then I just stare. Um.
What was I saying?
Please don't hurt that dragon.
Mmh--

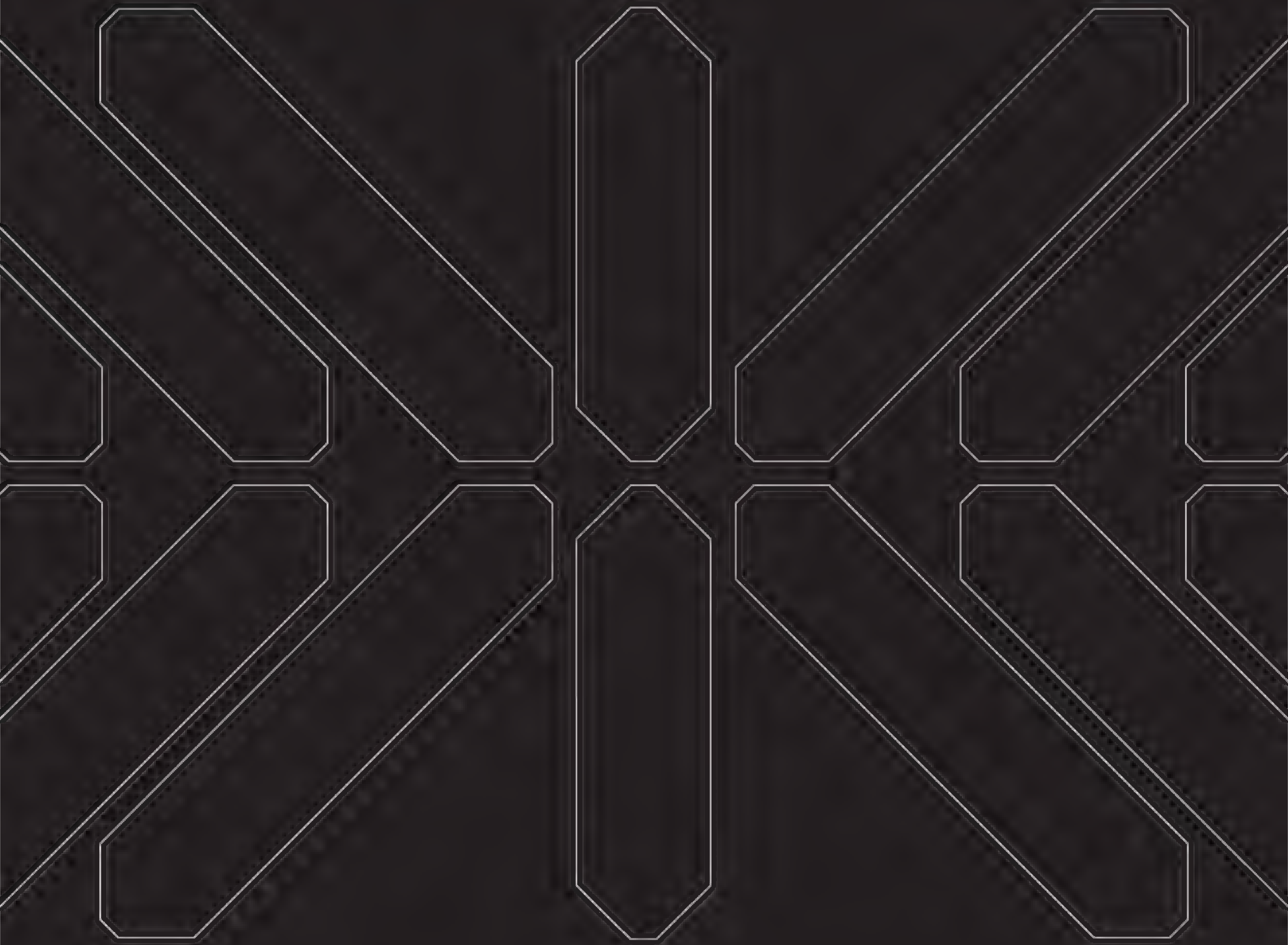
If either team would like an *extra point*, they can bring me Jubilee's *head.*
You gotta get mine first, bub!
Jubilee! Please--you don't understand what has happened.
If any of us *die* here, in the *Otherworld*, we cannot be resurrected--
Storm?! No way. Who else is here?
Shogo, *no, that's a friend!*
WHOOOOOOM
That baby hurts Storm, he's gonna be in *big trouble* with me--
Oh, that's right.
He's just a *baby.*
Poor little thing.
Come to Auntie Opal Luna.

Leave mother alone, yes?
Come stay with Miss Saturnyne. Let me *spoil* you.
Something's got ahold of him!
RRROOOOOOO!
WHOOOOM!!
"Give that dangerous, nasty dragon fire to me.
KCH--
KSH
KAKCH--
"I'll make sure no one gets hurt."
Jubes!
POP
POP
CRACKLE
Oh hey, fireworks!
When did those start?
Sorry, did we miss something?
Shogo's headed down and he's got Jubilee!
Storm, he's gonna buck her off--you gotta get her!

No! Lemme go!
Shogo, baby, no, turn back!
Storm, go after him!
We have to go after Shogo!
Hold fast, Jubilee.
We won't let her hurt your son.
Come here, little boy.
You're *lucky* that weddings need fireworks.
And that your *soft little brain* is so susceptible to my magic.
Now you're all mine, and I'll give you *whatever* you want.
But if you'd brought your mother in here with you?

I would have *killed* her *in front of all of her friends.*
Rooooo?
But for now, let's all be at peace.
We have a wedding to finish. Where are the bride and groom?
Well! I'd thought you would both come out a pair of *losers*, but what can I say?
A wedding, fireworks and my very own *dragon*. It's all got me in a good *mood*.
A point for each.
Time will tell if they remain *happy* about their victory.
...Shall we cut cake?
ARAKKO 2 · KRAKOA 1

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[kko_[0.0]

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[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

WOLVERINE #7

[XOS] [W7]

PERCY
DUGGAN
CASSARA
GURU-eFX

PART 16 OF 22

CHAPTER
16

[XOS....[016]_Wolverine]
[XOS....[0]_Crossover]

So many cards left in the deck.

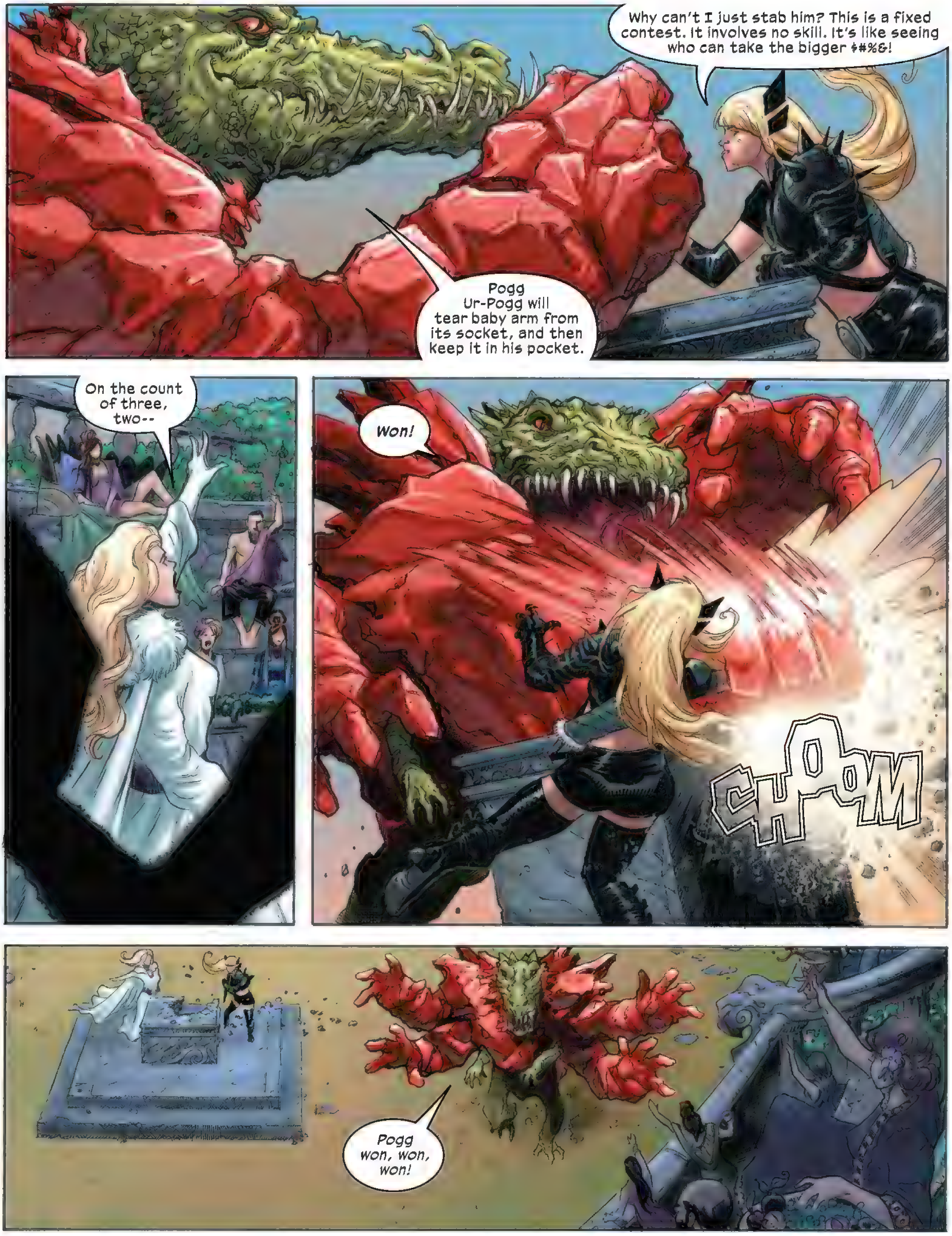
And we've only just begun to deal hands for the game.

-- SATURNYNE

The Holy Republic of Fae.
Hi! This seems to be the killing place.
But I guess I'm looking for the *other* killing place?
This card is supposed to tell me what to do.
But the directions are trash.
I'm a little upside down.
But I figure I'll just figure it out as I go...
The Floating Kingdom of Roma Regina.
...and stab whoever needs stabbing.

Hello, Reginas!
Wait--am I pronouncing that correctly?
Pogg Ur-Pogg is the more fit! Your sole chance is to forfeit!
Fat chance, dino.
It's Hog, right?
Pogg! Pogg Ur-Pogg!
You sure?
Because it's hogs that get butchered.

What Pogg Ur-Pogg beats, Pogg-Ur Pogg eats--you are adversary and confectionary!
Stay your swords.
This is a contest of *arms*.
Hands clasped, shoulders square, elbows in the pocket. Pin to win.
Arm wrestling? Seriously?


Why can't I just stab him? This is a fixed contest. It involves no skill. It's like seeing who can take the bigger $#%&!
Pogg Ur-Pogg will tear baby arm from its socket, and then keep it in his pocket.
On the count of three, two--
Won!
CHOOM
Pogg won, won, won!

ARAKKO 3 · KRAKOA 1

Blightspoke.
STRENGTH
I can feel you watching, witch. Where are you?
I am everywhere, Wolverine.
And you...you are nowhere.
Blightspoke is the realm of collapsed realities.

You're everywhere, I'm nowhere.
You already know I don't like your bull$%#@ game. Well, I don't like bull$%#@ riddles either.
You want me to fight?
Then bring on the damn--
Harr!
You think it's Summoner you're fighting to the death...

...but it's actually Blightspoke.
How long can two unbreakable figures...
...survive these broken domains...
...as the ruined wheel of Blightspoke turns?

THE BATTLE OF BLIGHTSPOKE

Would you look to the stars and think to poison them? Would you study a mountain range and guess you could slay it with a spear? Or pray for the death of a God? Perhaps only a drunk and weeping fool would fire a shotgun at the moon, but there are ways to end even the gigantic, the immeasurable.

Just as stars go black and mountains crumble to dust, realities can die.

Blightspoke is their cemetery and their hospice.

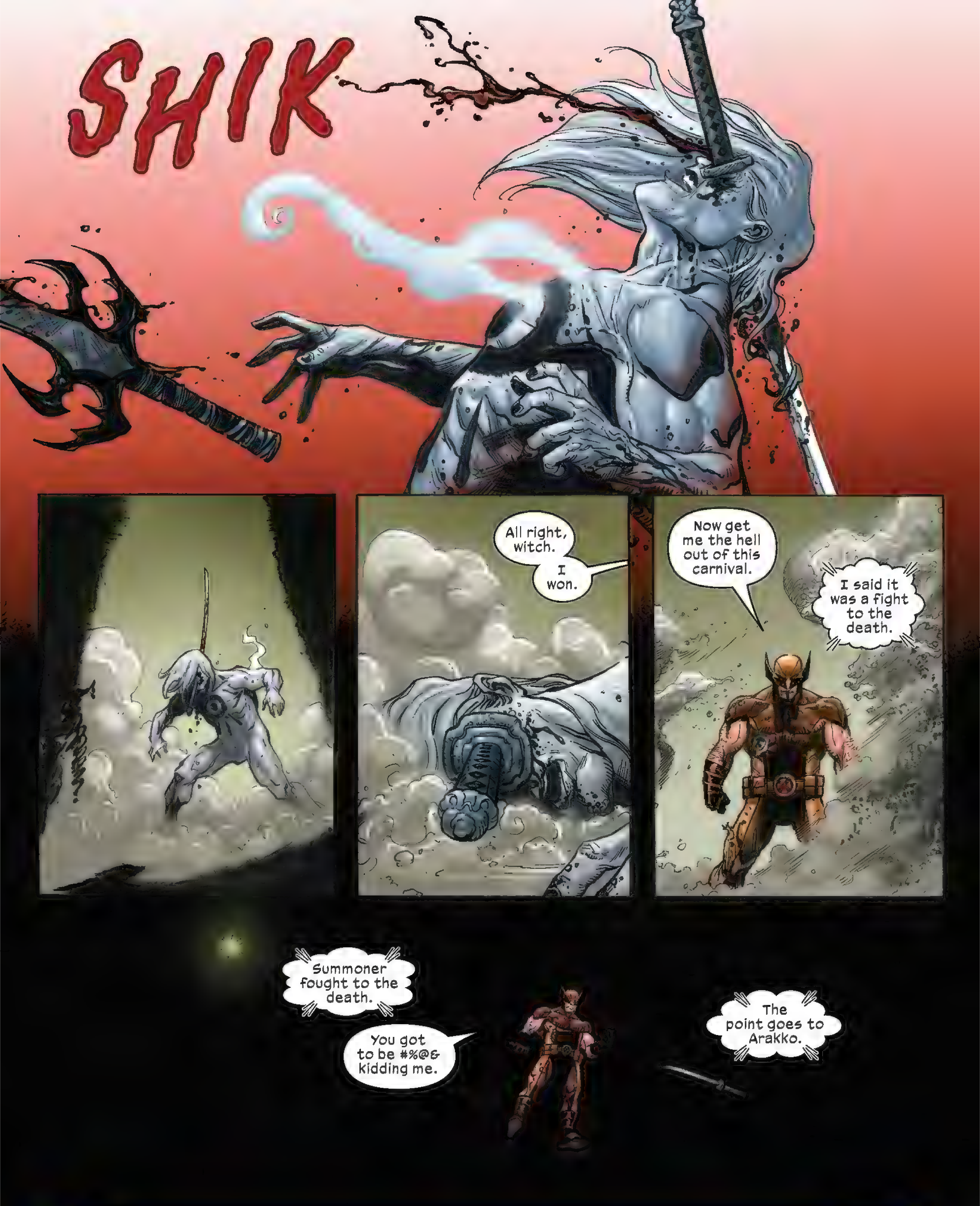
Nothing is unkillable. Certainly not these champions, Wolverine and Summoner.

Here they fight each other, even as they fight existence itself -- among the celestial and cellular and psychic and dimensional and elemental.

If this -- the fight for Arakko and Krakoa -- is a war of worlds, then the warring worlds of Blightspoke are a fitting arena to determine that fate.

And what is this? That holds the unfathomable together? Not a fabric, but a fluid. The blood of the blighted. It pulses with its own special graven flavor.

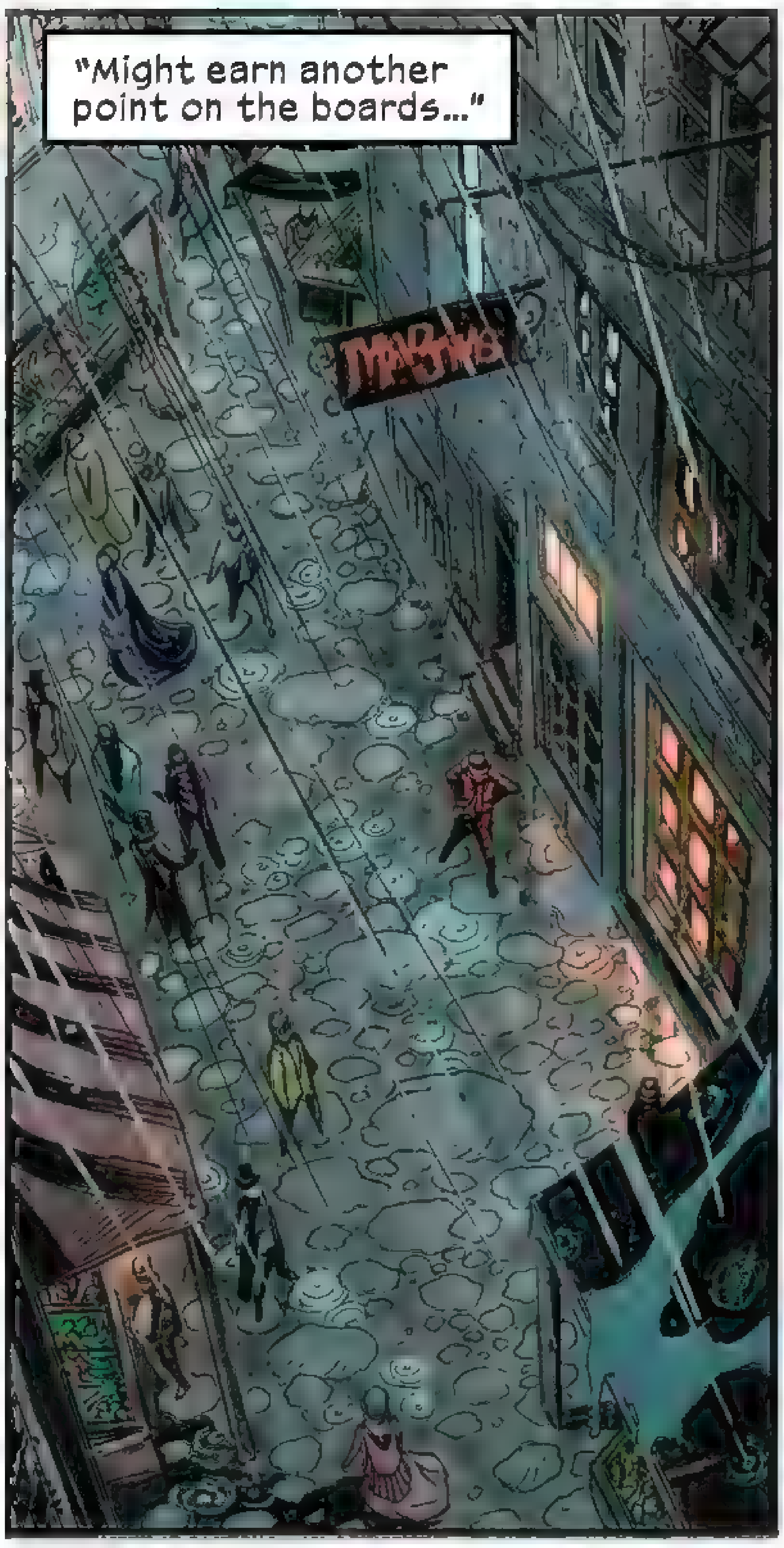
—

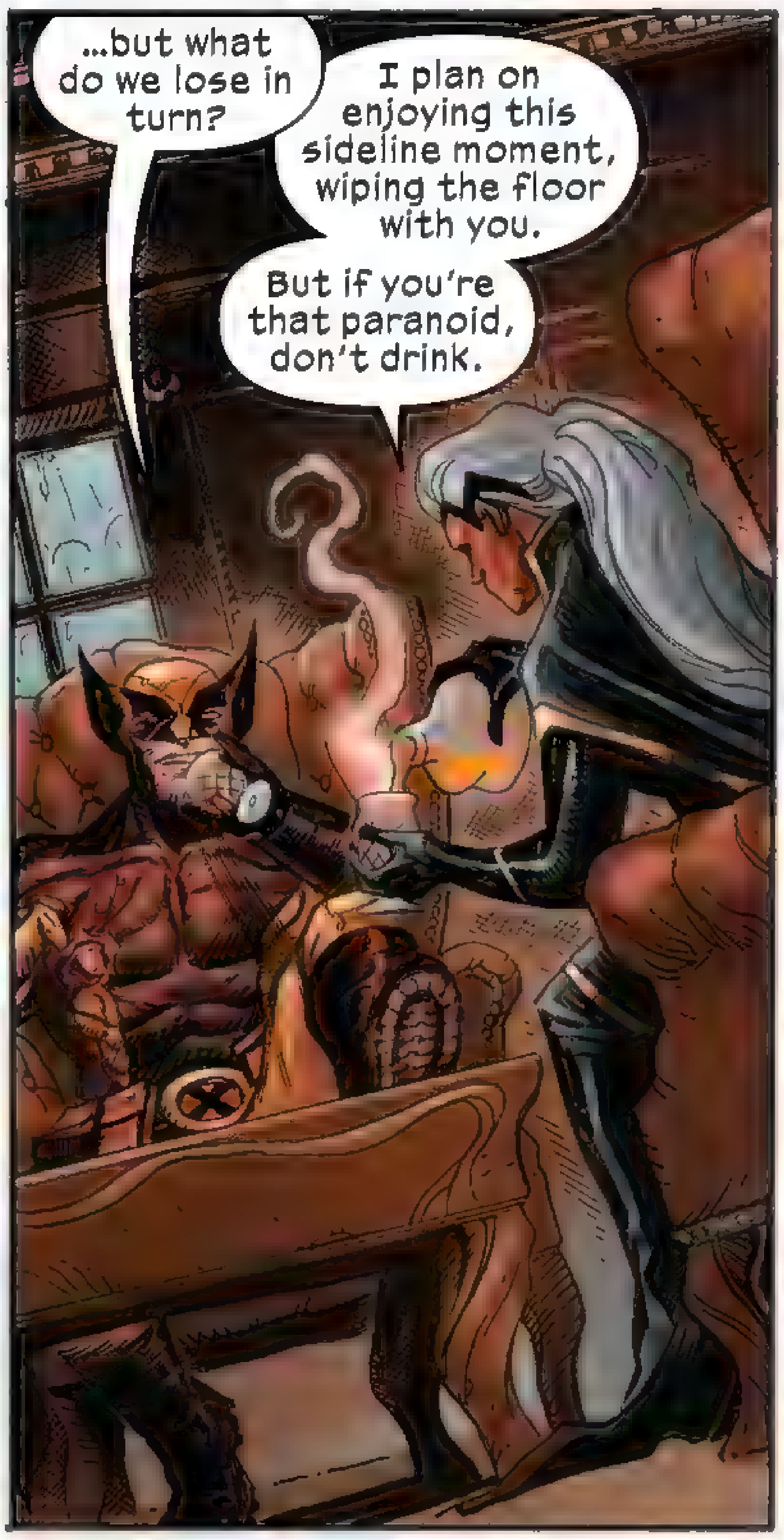

SHIK
All right, witch.
I won.
Now get me the hell out of this carnival.
I said it was a fight to the death.
Summoner fought to the death.
You got to be #%@& kidding me.
The point goes to Arakko.

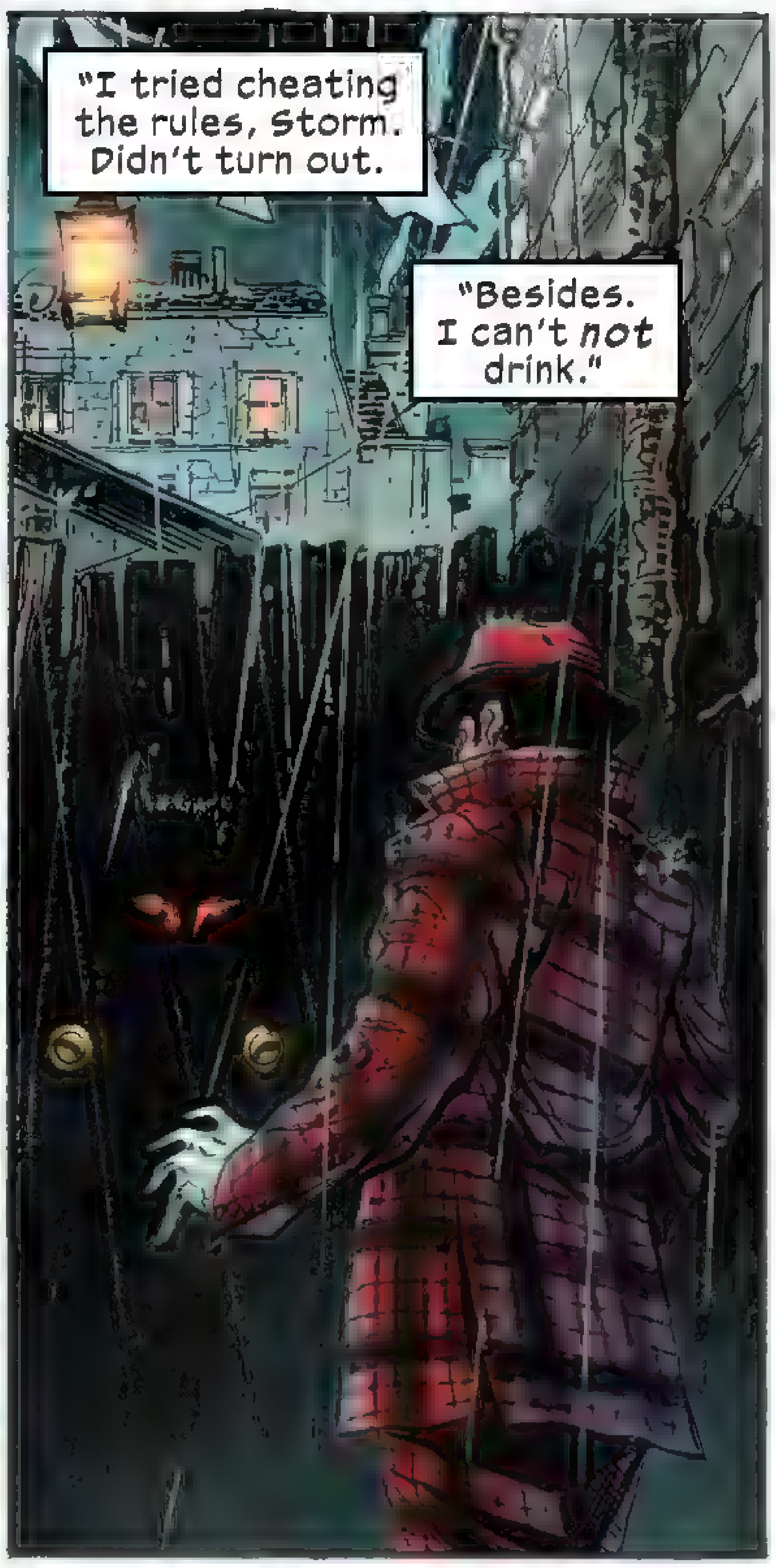
ARAKKO 4 · KRAKOA 1

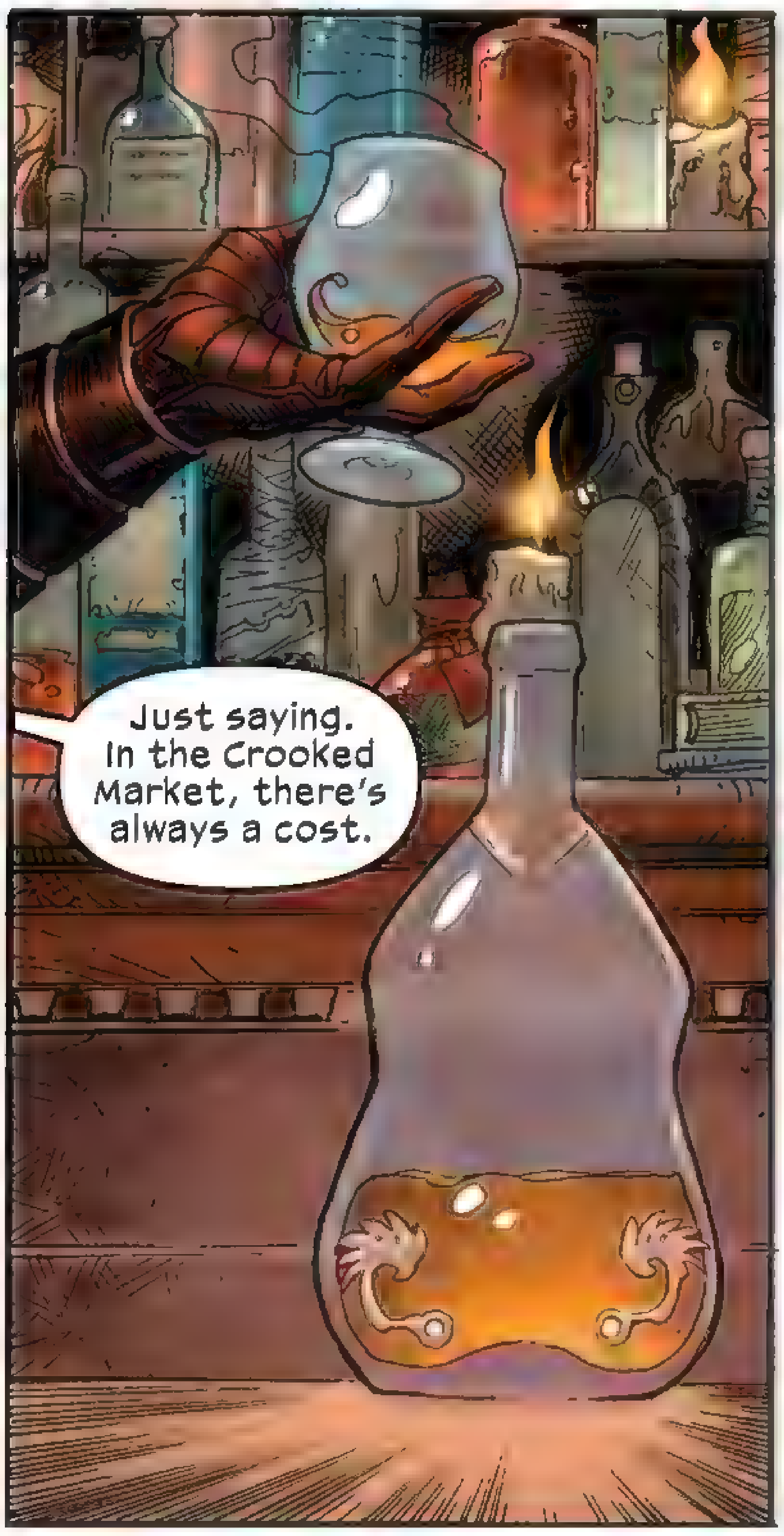
After all that fighting and losing, you must have a terrible thirst.
So for this next challenge, let's raise a glass, instead of a sword, and drink.
I lost? By winning? You're saying I survived that reality thresher for nothing?
This is beyond bull$#%&. What are we even doing here, Storm?
We're here to drown our sorrows, Logan.
Me versus you? But we're on the same team.
Doesn't matter--we came up, we have to battle.
Oh, she's right all right.
PAGE OF CUPS
And--lucky you--you get to sample some of the finest, rarest liquor in all the worlds.

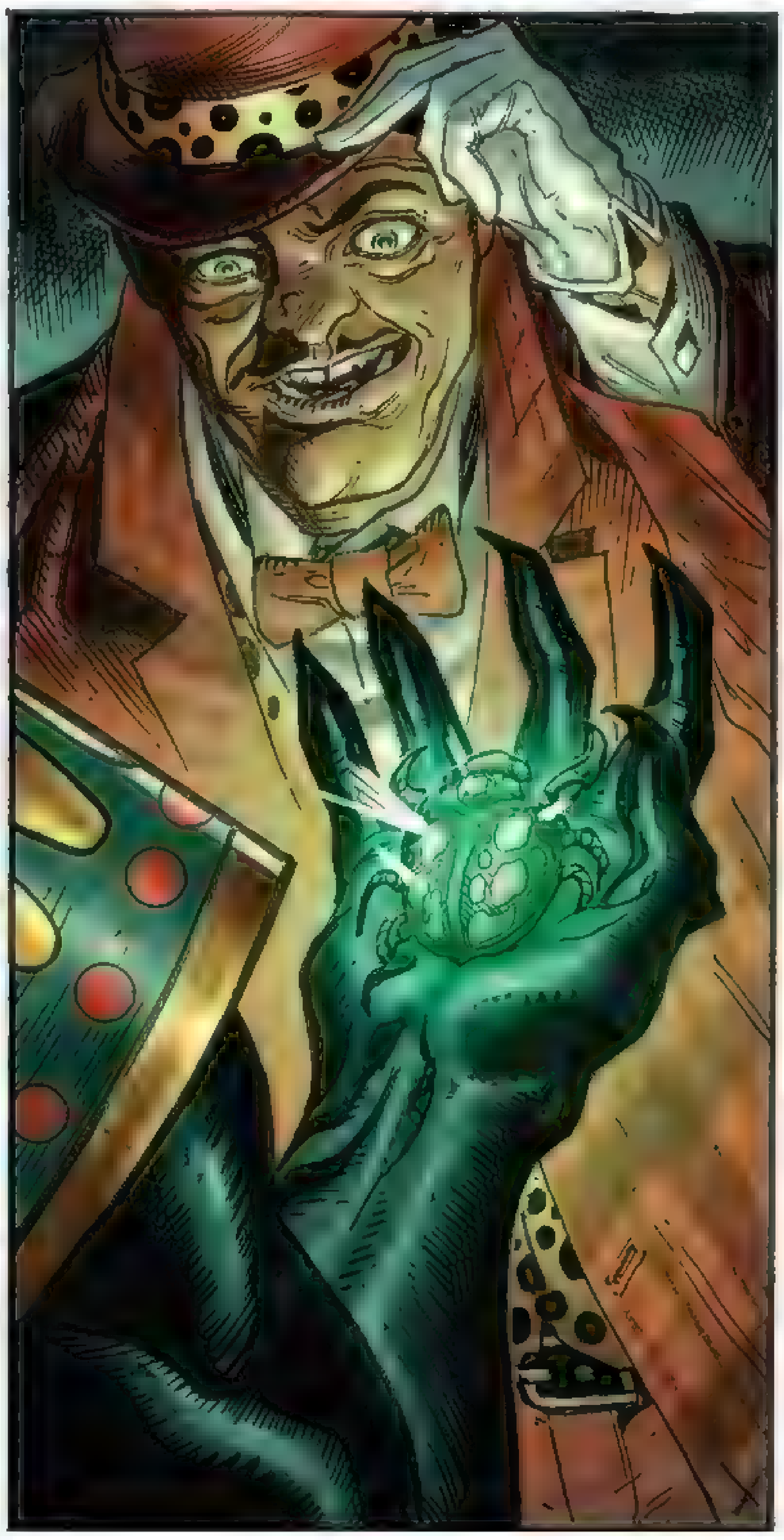
This vintage of Blightness is bloody magnificent, one of the most exquisite things you will ever put in your mouth.
Seriously? A drinking contest?
I know it's usually a solitary sport for you, but don't be afraid of a little competition.
Just trying to wrap my head around this. No matter which one of us loses, Krakoa wins?
Guess it's a gimme.
Tastes like fire and nectar all at once.
Tastes like more bull$#%& to me.

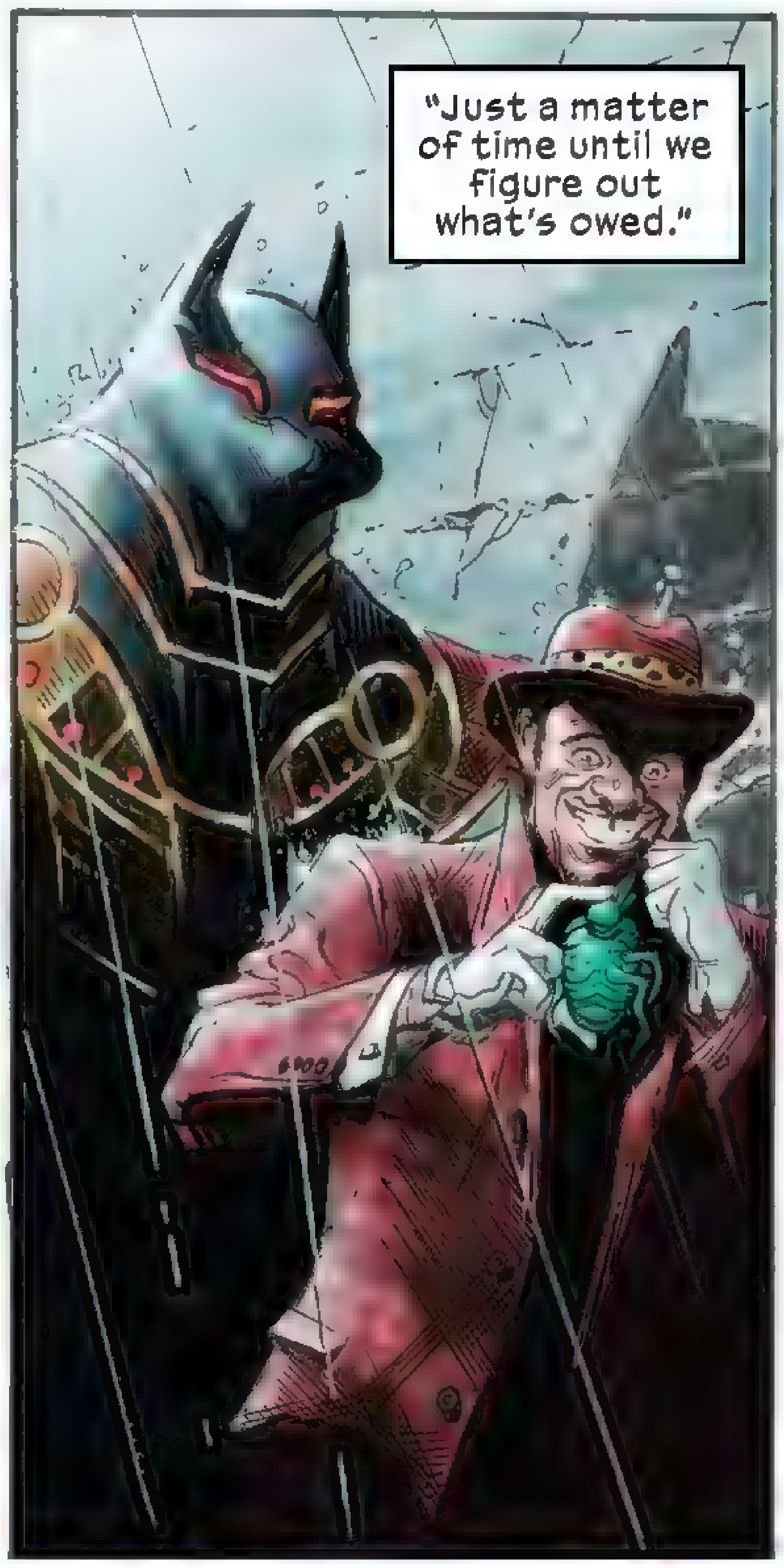

"Might earn another point on the boards..."


...but what do we lose in turn?
I plan on enjoying this sideline moment, wiping the floor with you.
But if you're that paranoid, don't drink.


"I tried cheating the rules, Storm. Didn't turn out.
"Besides. I can't *not* drink."


Just saying. In the Crooked Market, there's always a cost.




"Just a matter of time until we figure out what's owed."

ARAKKO 4 - KRAKOA 2

Feel kinda funny. A little empty.
A little tickly around the edges too?
Starlight Citadel.
You were all born of the same place and you all share the same blood.
So no matter your nation, you are all enemies and you are all lovers.
Or maybe that's just you. Making me tickly.
Watch your mouth, you dirty old flirt, or I'll tell Jean.
When Krakoa fights Arakko, so does it fight itself.
Solem... War...
I don't believe it will be a problem, convincing you to tear each other apart.

You're drunk.
No, you're drunk.
This is all very exciting, isn't it?
A bereaved widow is offered the opportunity to avenge her lost husband.
I won.
No, I won.
Maybe we won?
But I'm sorry to say I have other plans.
Saturnyne, my love?
"Bring me my boy."

Wha--?
Whoa, whoa, whoa.
Got temporal whiplash and a bad case of the dizzies.
Two questions. The hell am I doing here? And why am I hammered? I can't possibly be this hammered.
So sorry to interrupt your latest bender.
But the time has come to pay your debt.
What was in that hooch? What's happening to me?
What's happening indeed? You're trying to cheat the chess game, Solem?
Wolverine and I have an outstanding agreement, you see.
He asked for a sword, and I gave it to him, and together we massacred a sulfurous mob of demons. It was good fun.
But the price was this. He owes me a fight.

I know you're keen on revenge, War... Yes, I killed your husband a century ago.
But if I'm not mistaken...
...Wolverine here just killed your son.
Is this true?
Summoner? You're Summoner's old lady?
#$%@.
Begin your blades.
The first to sever an appendage wins.
THREE OF SWORDS
If I'm still... *urp*
...then that means my healing factor has $#@# the bed.

A SOLEM VOW

It seemed like a good idea at the time.

Solem offered a sword, and Wolverine accepted.

How could he not?

This was not just any sword, but a Muramasa blade. Forged in Hell and laced with the soul of the swordsmith himself.

He had quested across the world -- he had plunged into the pits of Hell and burned the flesh from his very bones -- all in an effort to secure it.

And there it was -- the keen edge gleaming red with hellfire.

Not that Wolverine could see it clearly. His eyes watered with the sulfurous breath of the Beast. And pain electrified him as a great, clawed hand crushed his torso.

All around him crowded the damned. A legion of ninjas. An extreme faction of the Hand. Their eyes burned like embers and their shinobi shōzoku wrapped them like black bandages.

He had to say yes. There was no choice but to say yes.

Because it wasn't just about his survival. It was about Krakoa's.

Solem was declared as his adversary, but so far he had behaved more as an ally. He seemed to have no loyalty to Arakko.

And here was the offer of a sword. But it came with a price. It was his, but only -- only -- if Wolverine made a promise.

"When I call for you, you will fight for me."

Could Solem be trusted? He most certainly could not.

But Wolverine took the sword, he sealed the promise, consequences be damned.

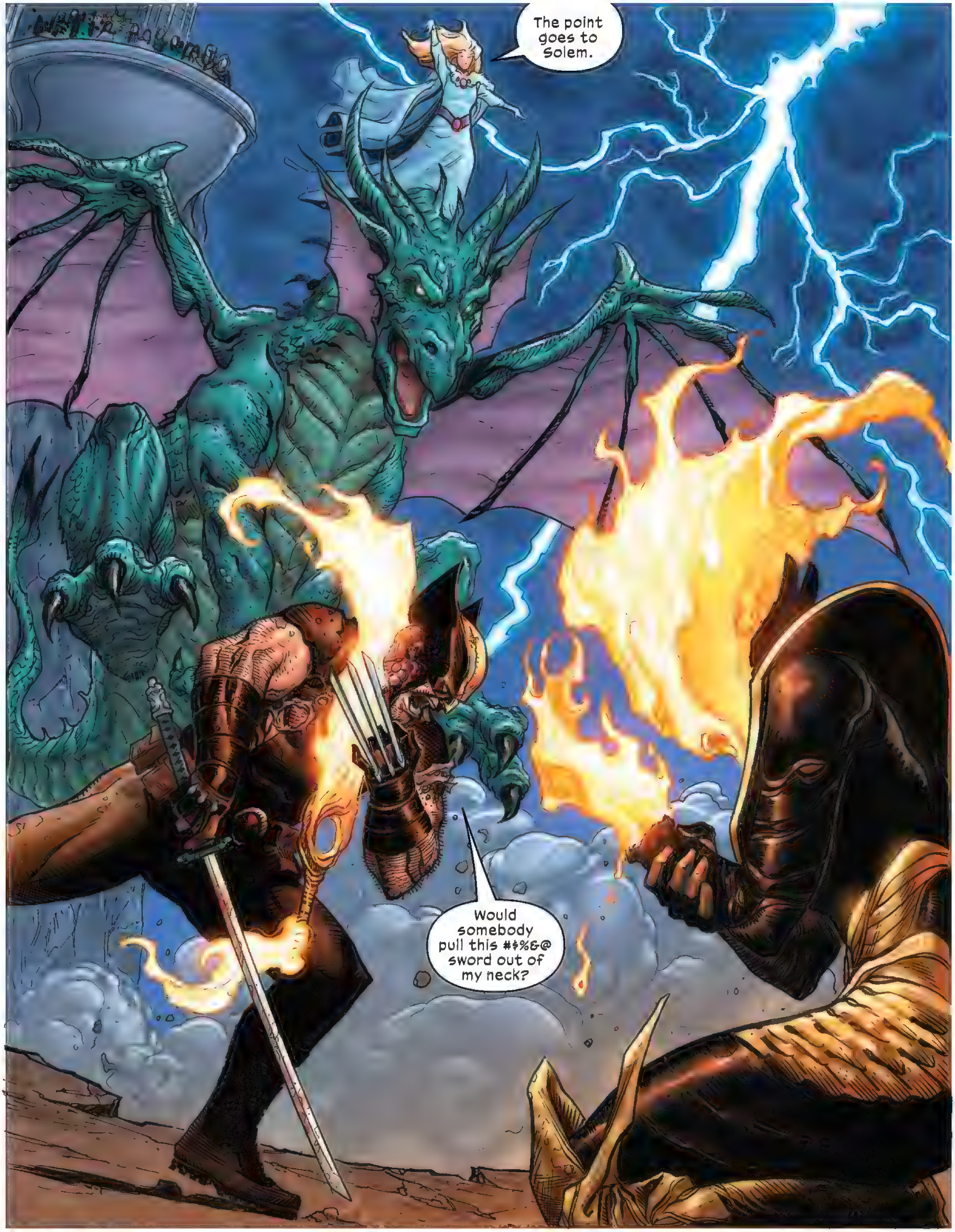
And together they swung their blades and spilled blood that stained their blades black, and the Beast howled and promised revenge for the work they had undone.

—

If I've lost my son...
...then you'll lose your head!
Can I get my head straight before you cut it off?
Just give me a minute.
SLIK
Hrrm.
You've gotten reckless, Wolverine.
With your healing factor and your resurrection protocols.

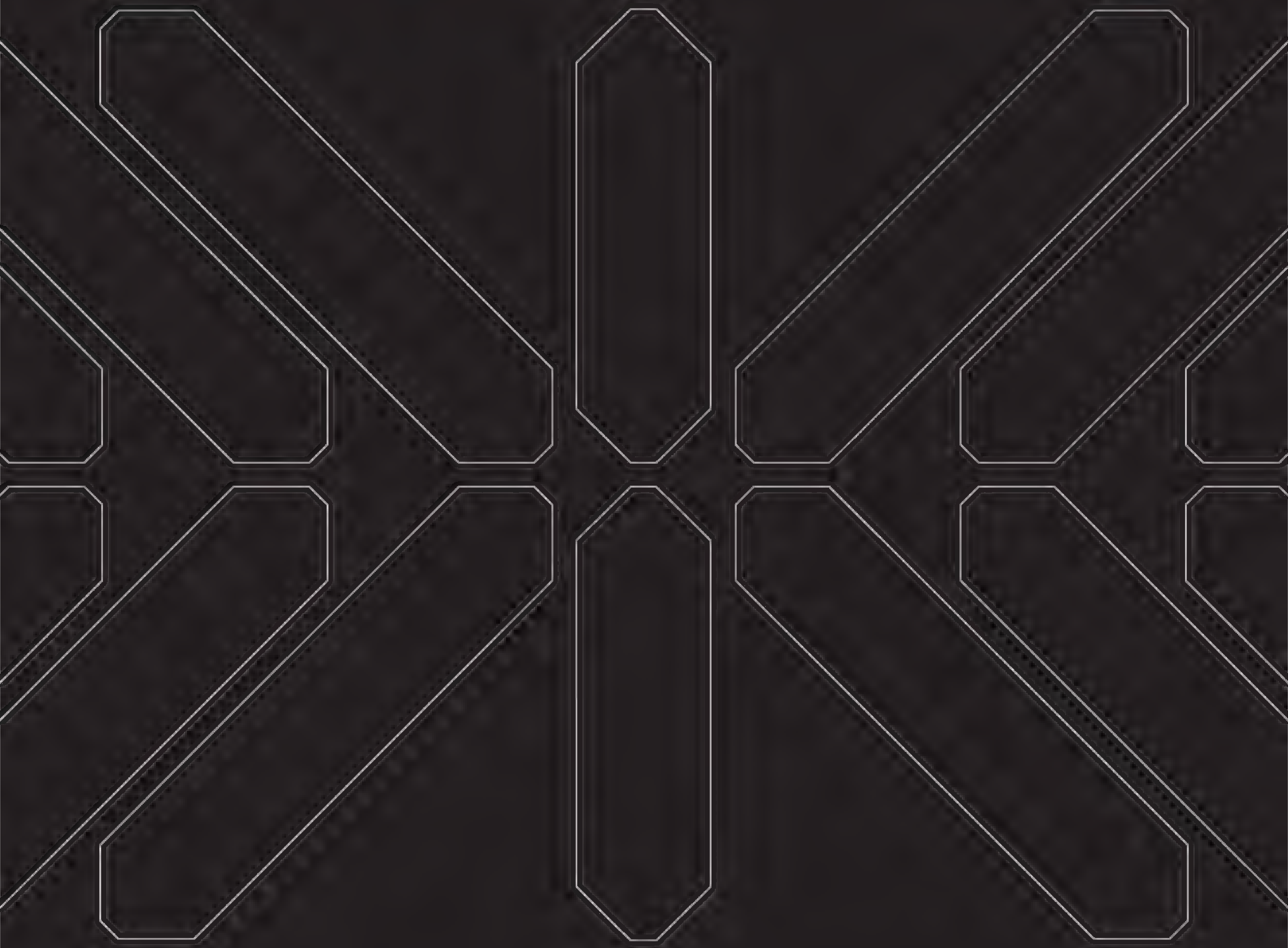
This is what it feels like to play for keeps.
Drunken boxed more times than I can count...
...but never tried swordfighting on more than a few splashes of sake.
KRINSH
What was in that bottle?
Saturnyne! What did we drink?!
Just as there is a cost to everything at the Crooked Market...
...there is a cost to trying to kill me.

I wonder how your friend will fare?
Storm...
In turn you'll each pay your own price.
SKELCH
Your head... it should be mine...
Adamantium spine says %$#G you!
SNIKT!
THAK


The point goes to Solem.
Would somebody pull this #$%&@ sword out of my neck?

ARAKKO 5 - KRAKOA 2

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

DUSTIN WEAVER
delgado

X-FORCE #14

[XOS] [XF14]

PERCY
DUGGAN
CASSARA
GURU-eFX

PART 17 OF 22

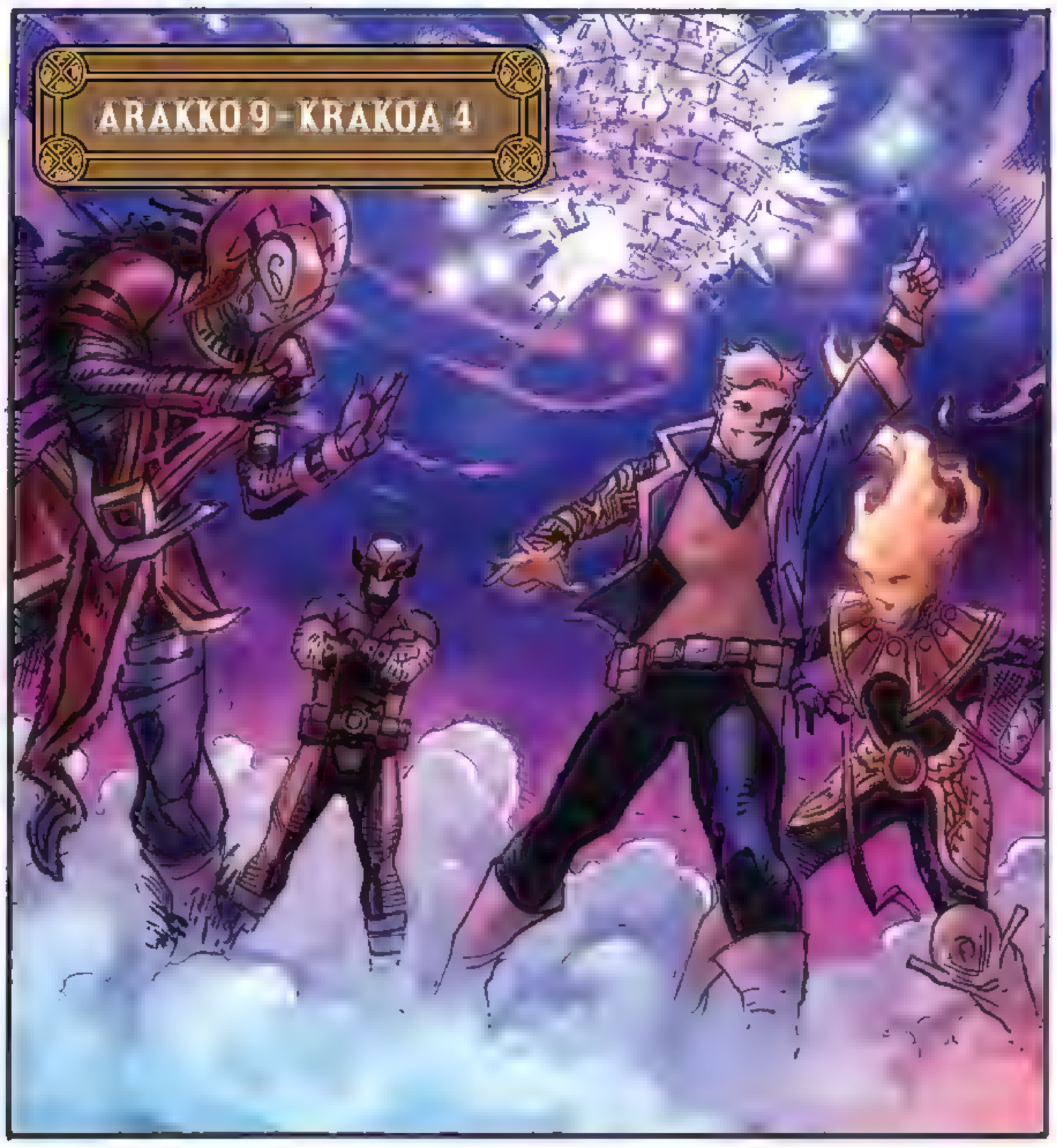
CHAPTER

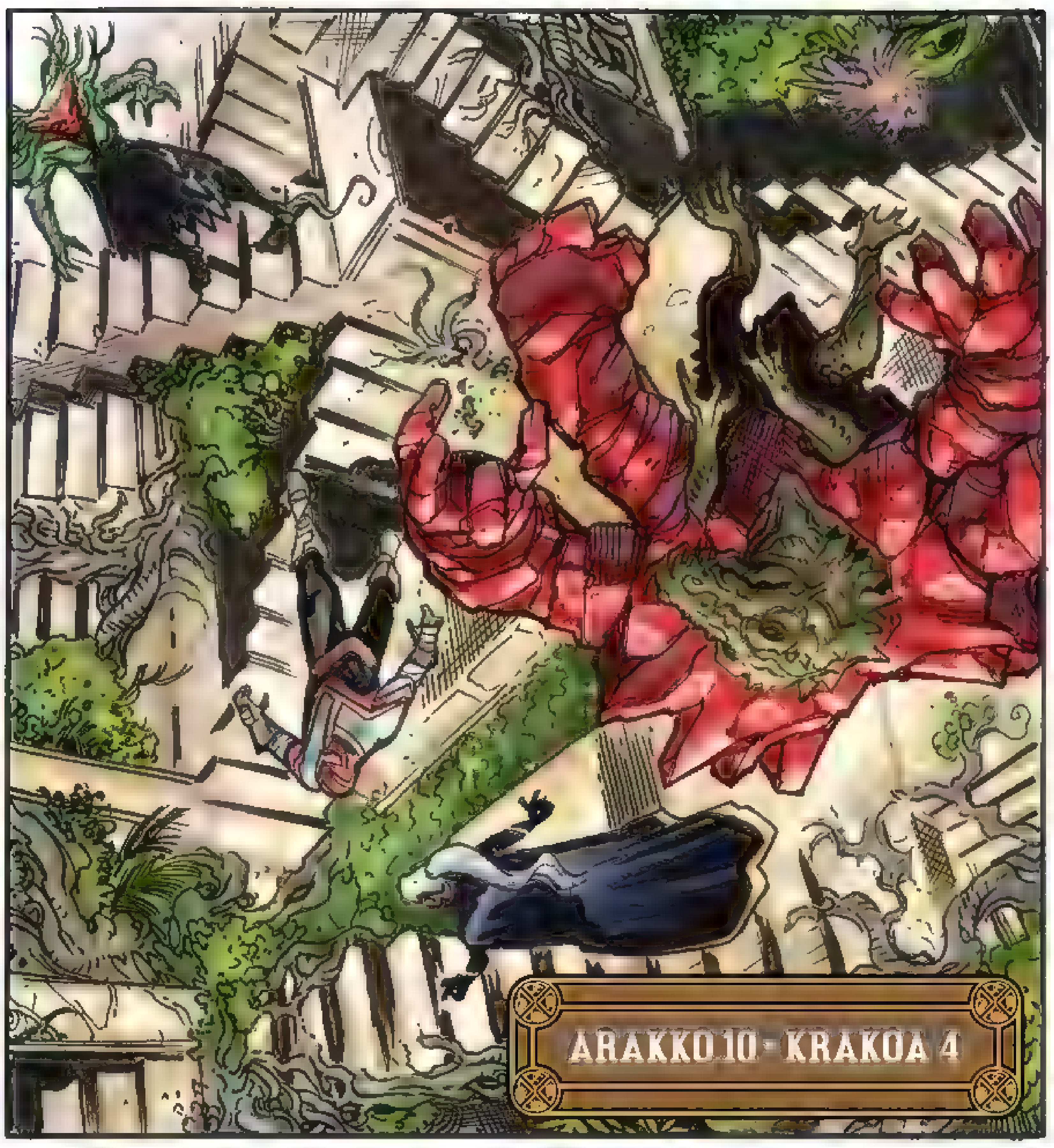
17

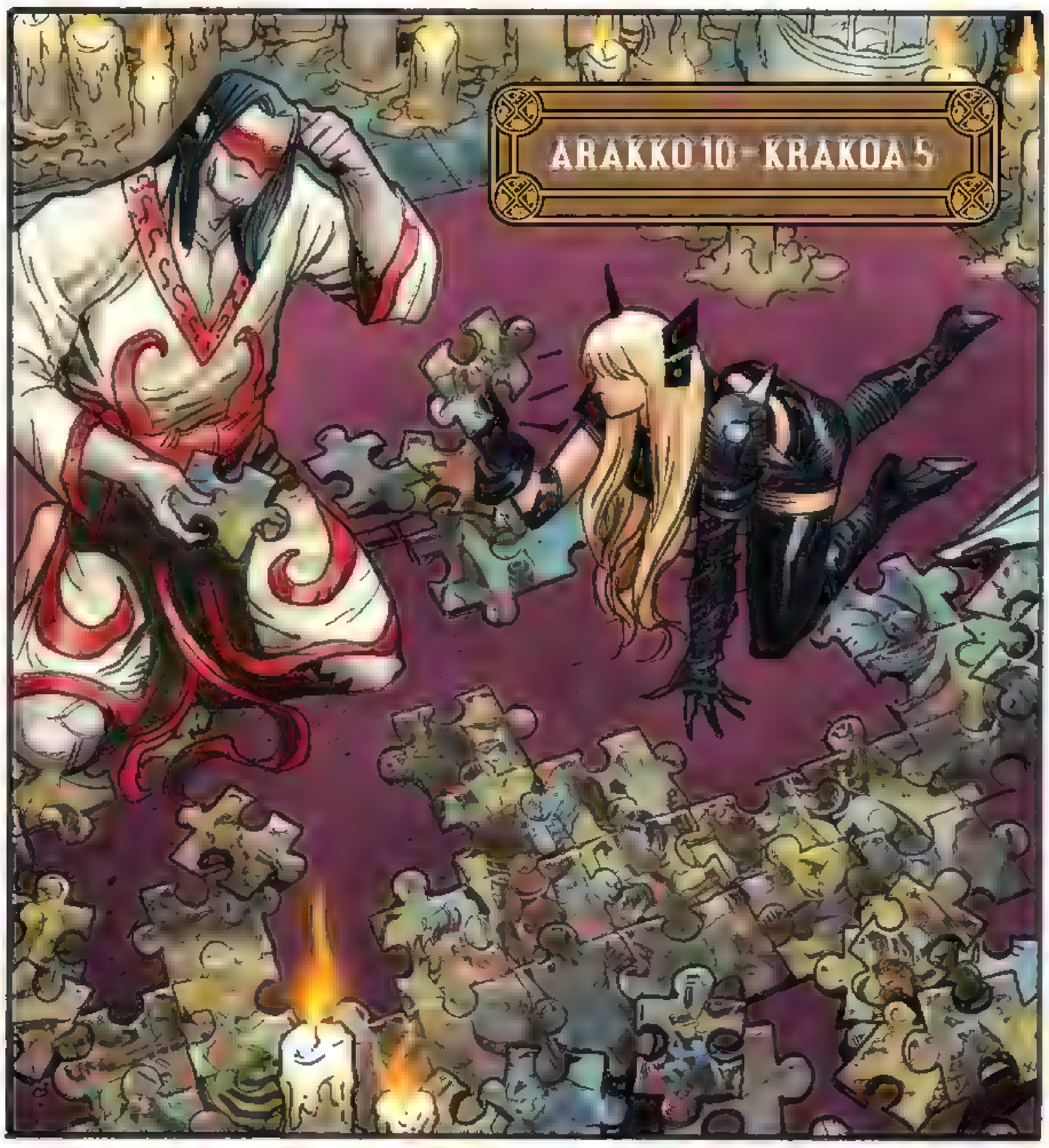
Things are about to get busy. A gauntlet of battles await.
Are you ready?
Again? I have to fight him again?
The Floating Gardens of Roma Regina.
The two of you will battle once more... unarmed.
Throw down your swords. And fight as you are.
You know what I learned? Since we last fought?
Your answer will be dull, so don't bother talking...
...when my mouth is full.
GULP

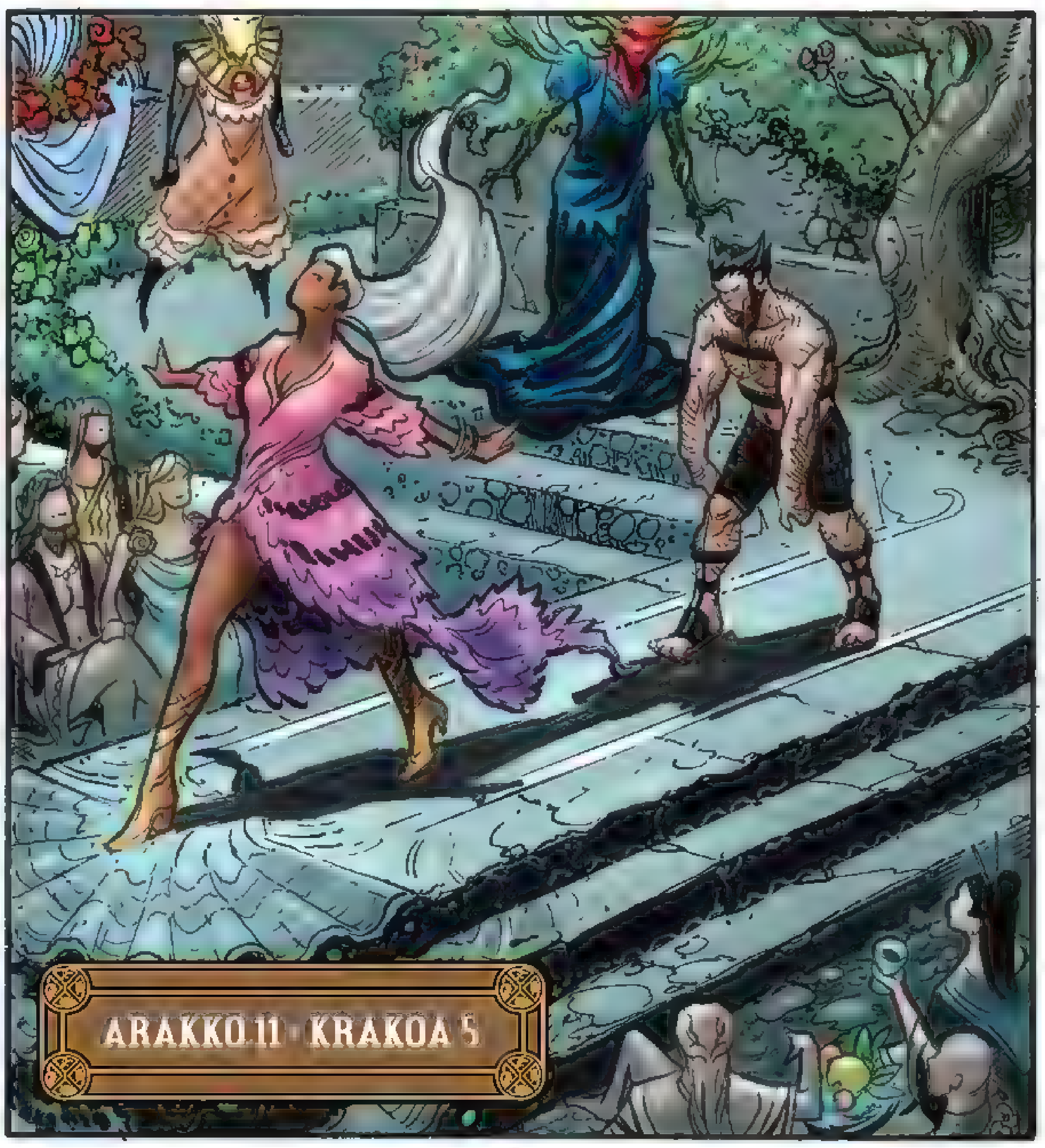
What at first tastes yummy...
...now begins to tickle funny...
...until Pogg Ur-Pogg feels suddenly crummy.
BLARGGG
Like I was saying, I learned something new.
AAAHH!
The word Pogg...it means "*sword*" in Arakkii, I think.
Your alligator pajamas are one big sword.
Now I know you're my opponent, but I pray you wait just a moment--
Nah.
This a fight to the death or submission?
Krak Krak Krak Krak Krak Krak Krak Krak
Either way, little guy--you're *beat!*
DOOSH
ARAKKO 5 · KRAKOA 3

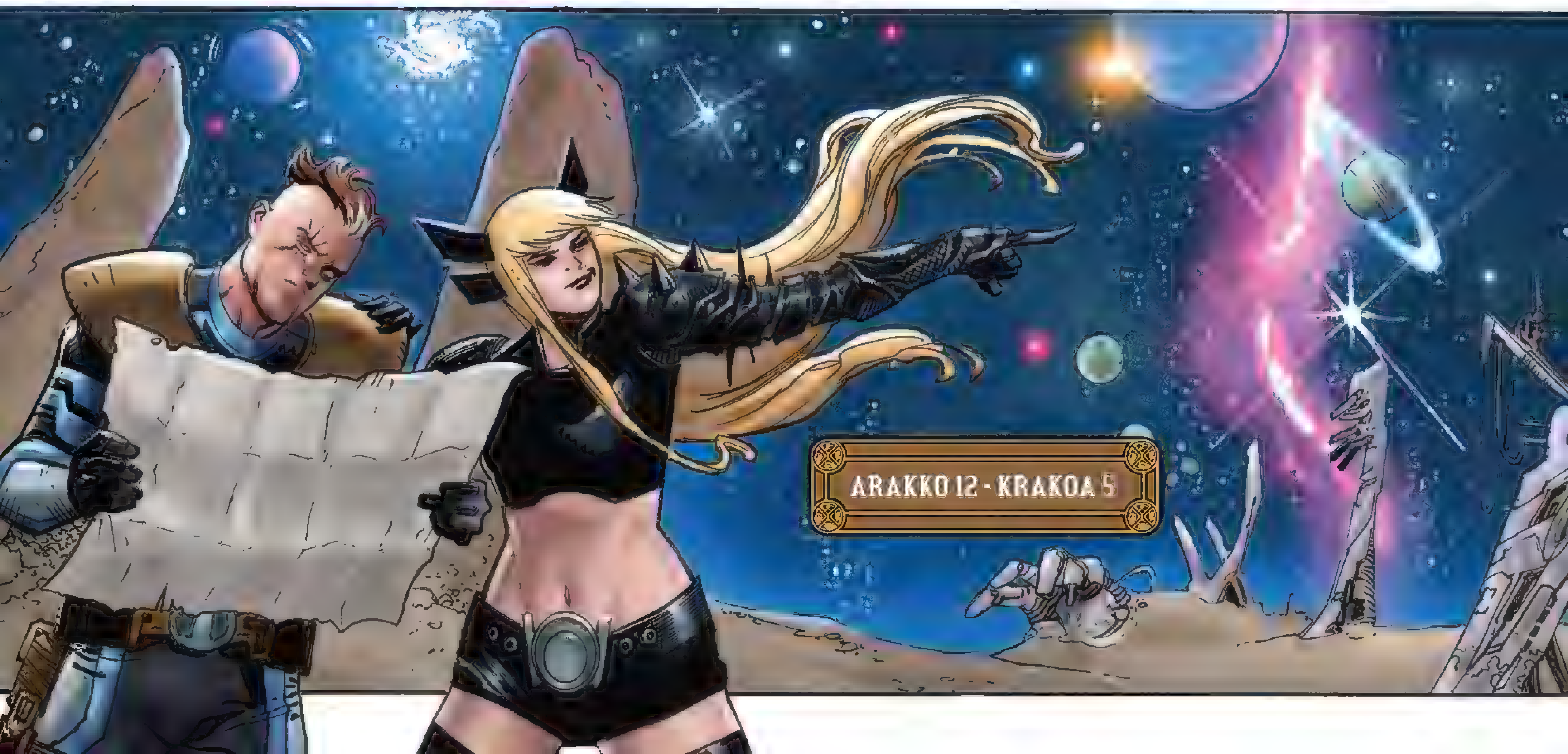
The contests continue with the speed of a deadly shuffle of cards.
ARAKKO 6 - KRAKOA 3
ARAKKO 7 - KRAKOA 3
ARRAKO 8 - KRAKOA 3
ARAKKO 8 - KRAKOA 4


ARAKKO 9 - KRAKOA 4


ARAKKO 10 - KRAKOA 4


ARAKKO 10 - KRAKOA 5


ARAKKO 11 - KRAKOA 5


ARAKKO 12 - KRAKOA 5

The Crooked Market.
I know you're sad.
But a part of you must be pleased...
...Captain Britain.
Don't call me that. Don't you dare.
It's yours now. The title you covet.
Stay away from me.
You'll come around, darling. Eventually.
And if sympathy doesn't work...
...Fury will.

On your marks, runners.
You can find anything in the Crooked Market if you look hard enough.
Even a finish line.
BOOM
I do wish that this could be a fair challenge, that we could find equal footing.
PERCY'S ODDITIES
But you're so slow, Redroot, you're a wilderness retreat.

Locking on: Captain-Avalon.
No!
Was it she who sent you? Saturnyne?
It was. It had to be.
Oh my.
Know that I'm *rooting* for you, Captain Avalon.

Saturnyne!
Saturnyne... I know you've rigged this and every contest.
"Whatever trust ever existed between us...
KRINSH
"...was long ago shattered."
Everything has a cost at the market.
Everything.

You broke her. You broke Betsy into a thousand pieces.
And I'll break anything you throw in my way.
I feel-- *huff, puff*-- the wind in my leaves.
Saturnyne! Are you hearing me?!
I feel-- *huff, puff*-- like a sapling again.
Bravo, darling.
I won?
But I've never won anything before.
ARAKKO 13 · KRAKOA 5

Congratulations are in order, I'm sure, but there is the matter of your *debt*.
My--?
Oh, were you not aware that you shattered a rare crystal idol of Bombu? Crafted from the salt of an Oobagonian princess's tears?
What? No, I--oh, dear--how much did it cost?
It was priceless.
Bon
CHOOOM
Be gone.
It's over, then...
The race is, yes. But you still have a challenge ahead of you, my darling.

"Poor Redroot is discovering now...
"...that this realm has a cost."
The damage you alone caused...it's incalculable.
You'll be thrown into his debtor's oubliette.
Unless...
Unless *what?*
Unless, my dear Brian, you ask for my help.

[FIGHT....[000]_01]
[COVER....[age]_14]

My most magnificent father-leader, here are the reports submitted by Quaddeus Quo during the contest of swords that you requested. Despite his hurried and haphazard observations, I have typed them into an organized manner more befitting of your glorious creative excellence.

--Major Domo

[redacted]

CAPTAIN BRITAIN LOST TO ISCA THE UNBEATEN.
In a duel of swords, Betsy Braddock lost to Isca. Isca didn't just kill Betsy, however--she shattered her into crystal shards that were promptly whisked away by Saturnyne's attendants on our lady's orders.

THIS COULD BE AN EPISODE CLIFF-HANGER FOR THE TELEVISION EVENT. DRAFT A SCRIPT, DOMO.
--MOJO

MAGIK LOST TO POGG UR-POGG.
Just the first time, in their arm wrestling match. There was, however, a rematch, in which she trounced him.

IN OUR VERSION OF THIS FOR THE SHOW, LET'S HAVE MAGIK LOSE BOTH TIMES AND BECOME POGG UR-POGG'S LOVE INTEREST AFTERWARD.
--MOJO

WOLVERINE AND SUMMONER FOUGHT TO THE DEATH.
Wolverine won the fight but the point was awarded to Summoner, since the goal was fighting TO die.

DANCE-OFF.
Cypher fared surprisingly well, though Arakko took the point.

DOMO, MAKE A NOTE FOR HEADSHOT TV™ THAT THERE'S SPIN-OFF POTENTIAL HERE.
--MOJO

EATING COMPETITION.
At a table catered with purchases from the Crooked Market, contestants imbibed in singularity-aged fungcheese, Dryadori rotcrab mustard, inert Hothive-spiced venom jam and an Earthen mayo-asparagus Jell-O mold. Somehow, despite revulsion on both sides, the Krakoan Cable seemed to power through.

I SEE SATURNYNE HAS BEEN WATCHING EARTH'S TELEVISION AS WELL. WHAT A HACK!!!
--MOJO

DRINKING CONTEST.
Our lady drew a card for both food and drink, it seems. Down by two points, Krakoa's Storm and Wolverine participated in a drinking contest against one another, winning by default. But little did they know both would still have to compete after this, whilst entirely drunk.

RUNWAY WALK-OFF.
Arakko took the point, while Storm and Wolverine stole the show--although not because Logan was good at this. He was simply so uncomfortable that it was hard to look away from him, while Storm strutted the catwalk with a confident, swaggering walk, though it is believed this was due to her inebriation.

WOLVERINE LOSES AGAIN.
Drunk and without his powers, Wolverine was summoned to fight on Solem's behalf against War and won the point for Arakko.

LET'S GIVE NOD TO HISTORICAL ACCURACY AND ALSO MAINTAIN THE X-MEN'S OBLITERATIVE LOSING STREAK IN OUR RETELLING OF THESE EVENTS. WE'LL HAMMER IT DOWN AS WOLVERINE'S HEEL TURN. TELL MARKETING TO PREPARE FOR "THE ULTIMATE BETRAYAL!!!"
--MOJO

Our next contestant will now step forward.
Here is your clue. Please spell your answer.
A white rabbit pulled out of a black top hat and a spell cast by a wizard and the very life force of Saturnyne. What am I?
Oh, that's an easy one. Magic. And it's spelled...
M-A-G-I-K.
That is incorrect.
ARAKKO 14 · KRAKOA 5
You will observe the faces of all those you have killed.
The first to look away loses.
So take in the vast cemetery of lives you have reaped.
Take them all in. And don't even blink.
ARAKKO 15 · KRAKOA 5

What are we dealing with here?
These are the rock sirens of Clevermore.
Few can resist their call.
Let's get out of here.
I think Gorgon's going to #%&@ that boulder.
ARAKKO 16 · KRAKOA 6
What is the task?
Kill the kitten.
Mew
You wouldn't...
ARAKKO 17 · KRAKOA 5

[Bli....[GHT]_00]
[Blo....[OD]__14]

BLIGHTSWILL

If the bones of great and towering lizards could one day become an ocean of oil, then what will be born of fallen worlds and collapsed realities?

What wealth can be harvested from the realm of Blightspoke?

Its blood, for one.

It is a summery gold. Like liquid sunshine. With a flavor as delicious as spicy nectar and an inebriating punch that would dizzy the stoutest constitution.

But beware any indulgence. Because it is the distillation of the fallen, the essence of depletion, a rotten form of energy.

Among the mutants it has proven to be deadly at worst -- and a severe drain and inhibitor at best -- as it leeches the very thing that makes one special, as if thirsty itself for what it once possessed: power.

The length and severity of its effect is entirely dependent upon how much one has imbibed -- and Wolverine and Storm imbibed quite a lot.

He has a healing factor that pushed the poison through his system relatively quickly.

She...does not.

You asked me to dance once.
Now it is my turn.
Hnnh...
Death is asking you to dance.
There's something wrong with me.
You're nervous. That's all. And how could you not be...

...in a place such as *SEVALITH*.

It smells like the dead here.
No.
It smells like the undead.
Whatever Logan and I drank...
I can't fight. I can barely stand.
Oh, but you must. Unless you choose to forfeit?
By the Goddess...
...no #%@& way.

SLISH
Then the dance begins.
I'm more than poisoned.
I feel... vacant.
The wind that always surrounds me like a song...the electricity that hums like nerve endings...
CHING
...it's gone.
My powers are gone.
CHANG

As sick as you are...
Death will be a welcome kiss.
You assume I will lose?
Let me make something perfectly clear.
My powers aren't what make me powerful.
KRINSH
This has gone on long enough, I think.
I am tired of dancing.
Now look upon the last face all life sees.

You first.
Hunnhhh...
I'm tired of dancing too.
SKELCH
Well... he's bleeding, isn't he?

Have a taste.
ARAKKO 17 - KRAKOA 6

[xfo [0.14]
[rce_[0.14]

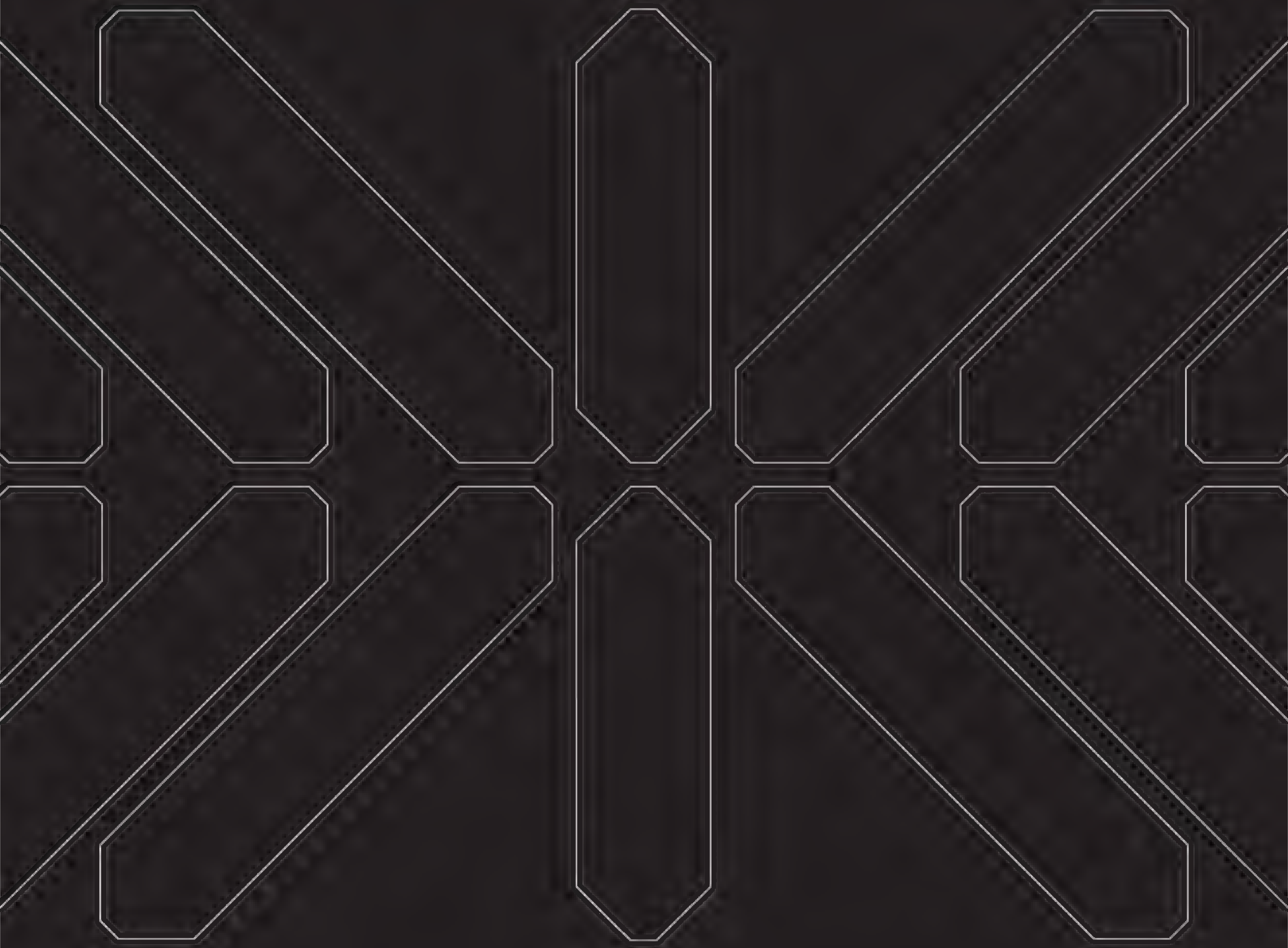
> One day whatever you own will belong to someone else. Whatever you build will be broken. Whatever you love will die. So today you might as well lie and screw and steal and murder and scream with abandon, don't you think? Because tomorrow knows no mercy.
>
> -- SOLEM

[xfo_[0.X]
[rce [0.X]

[xfo_[0.14].....]
[rce_[0.14].....]

[X-Force_alpha..]

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

SJ SEGOVIA

HELLIONS #6

[XOS] [HEL6]

WELLS
CARNERO
CURIEL

PART 18 OF 22

CHAPTER

18

[unca [0.6]
[ring_[0.6]

I do not scorn your fear nor condemn your hatred. These show your heart has wisdom. We come to end you.

-- TARN THE UNCARING

[unca [0.X]
[ring_[0.X]

[hell_[0.6].....]
[ions_[0.6].....]

[Hellions_alpha.]

Arakko.
Dryador gate.
CRNCH
CRNCH
Neeee.

BREATHE IT IN! ARAKKO!
I told you we'd make it.
I'm sure the naysayers would like the chance to apologize, but NO! I can--and will--punish you later.
For now, our bounty awaits!
Y-you did it, Sinister. I can't believe it.
You know who I wish was here to see this?
MY EYE, you piece of #@$%!
Yes, those *hippogriffs* took their bridge toll seriously, didn't they?
I'll get the next one.
Promise.
I pray you know where we're going, Sinister. The Feculent Unwed escaped with our supplies. This is the last of our food.
Don't worry, Manuel! I've still got my rations hidden away. I haven't touched a bit, just like you said!
Heard you the first ten to twelve times, John. Thank you.
You've had your fun, Manuel. Leave that man's mind alone.
If I stop now he'll cut my head off. But thanks for the advice, *giant egg.*
Let's go ahead and fire up our *inside voices,* team. We'll need stealth to claim our prize.
Ah, a prize...

What "prize" brought this soft mutant stock for me to mangle?
We're discovered.
The *Ten Swords* of *Arakko.* Where are they gathered?
We need them before the great contest begins. For this reason I will ask only *once.*
The Ten Swords of Arakko?
Children, they are in Otherworld. Through the gate you just came from.
Where they are wielded by their champions in a contest that is *well* underway.
Poor fools, who sent you on this dullard's errand?
Sinister, you *mother--*

YOU SAID YOU KNEW WHERE YOU WERE GOING!
N-now, remember what those gnomes said in their book--"Just because you're wandering around, it doesn't mean you're lost, necessarily."
THAT'S NOT THE QUOTE, DUMB-ASS!
Grrrrr...
Maybe now you'll let Greycrow go? I'd love to see *him* deal with Sinister.
No! Final answer.
Smart move, Manuel! Really, *great idea* as usual!
Please shut up.
You said we *had* to cross that bridge. "No price was too high to pay."
What the hell were you thinking?!
Yesss... What *were* you thinking?
Hnnnnnn...
Ah ah, OW--
Get out of my mind!

Ah, *Mister Sinister* came all this way to collect the *true* treasure of Arakko.
The genes of its mutants.
This is about your stupid *collection?!*
You played us--the Council, everyone?!
So bizarre. You allow your children to look you in the eye? My mutants know better.
GET OFF ME! Someone actually said something interesting.
You have mutants? Where are they? Can I see?
I suppose. If you promise not to touch.
HAMANNAS ECLEPTUM!

To me, my *Locus Vile.*

THE LOCUS VILE

THE SIN-BLOODED SCOURGE OF AMENTH

*"That terrible fate, to be Locus Vile. That privilege of mutilation and scar.
That honor of submission and gore."*

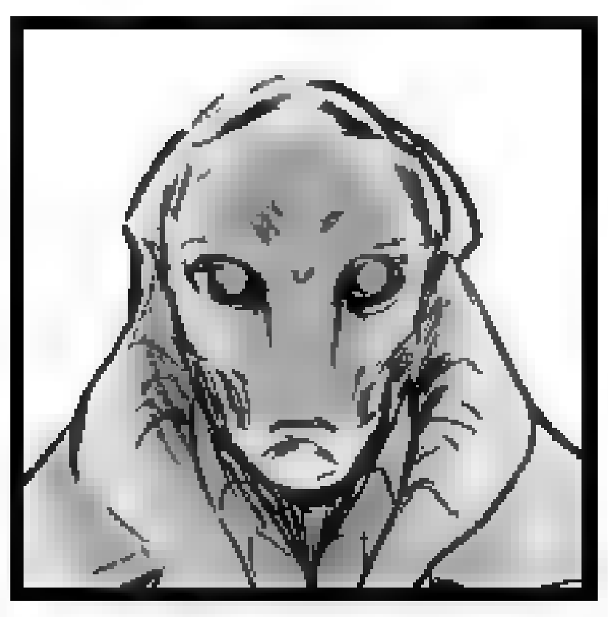
These things are Holy to The Vile:

To abandon yourself, becoming the canvas of Tarn.

To be feared and hated throughout Amenth, proving the sacrilege of your being.

To usher Tarn to new lands, so he may pervert the fauna there.

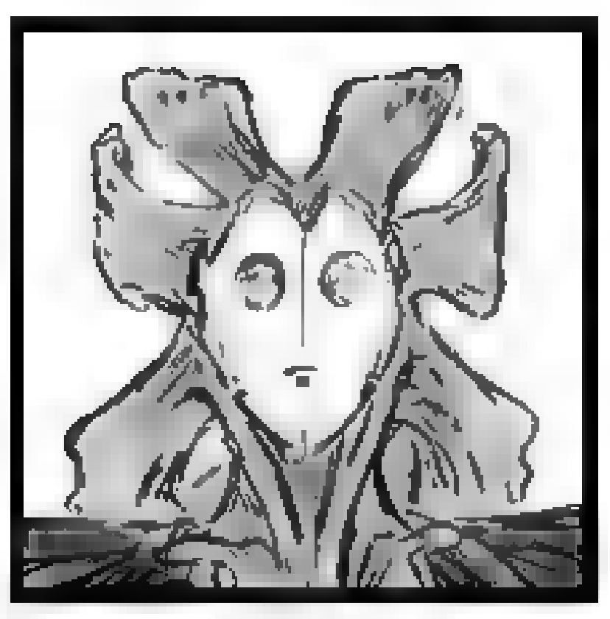
KNOW THE GREAT GENOMIC MAGE



TARN THE UNCARING

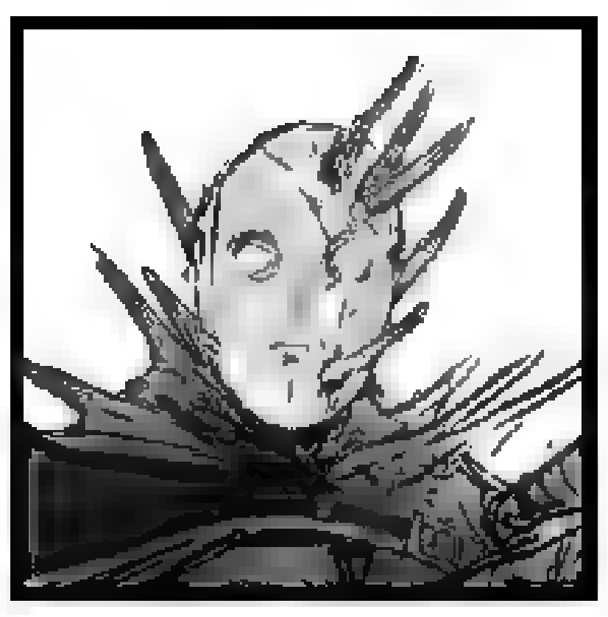
The helix bends to Tarn's will. He thinks music and atoms dance. Amenthian mutants gift themselves to Tarn, who sculpts their genes anew. So begins the pilgrimage of pain toward a more profound mutation. Many perish. Those who live follow him as their god, praying for macromutation.

KNOW THE LOCUS VILE



MOTHER RAPTURE

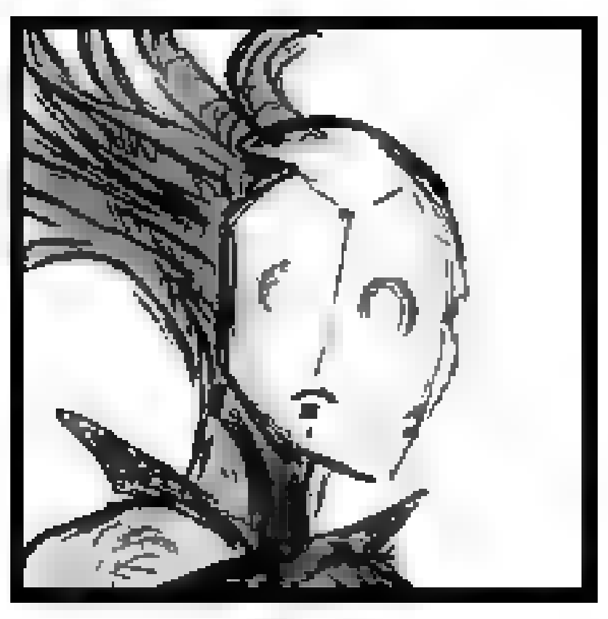
The tamer of the Blade Fish. The mother of the Second Birth, that journey into death.



HEX BUTCHER

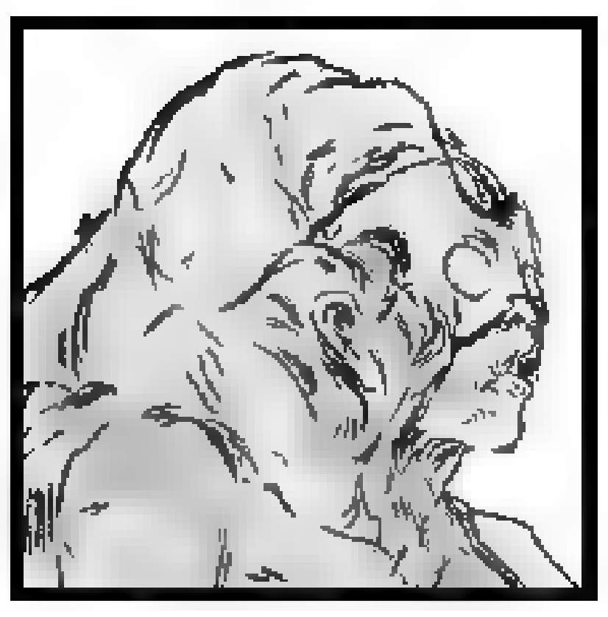
For his speed, he must eat. For his strength, he must eat. For his joy, he must eat. And so he butchers. And so he eats.

And watching, Amino Fetus covets.



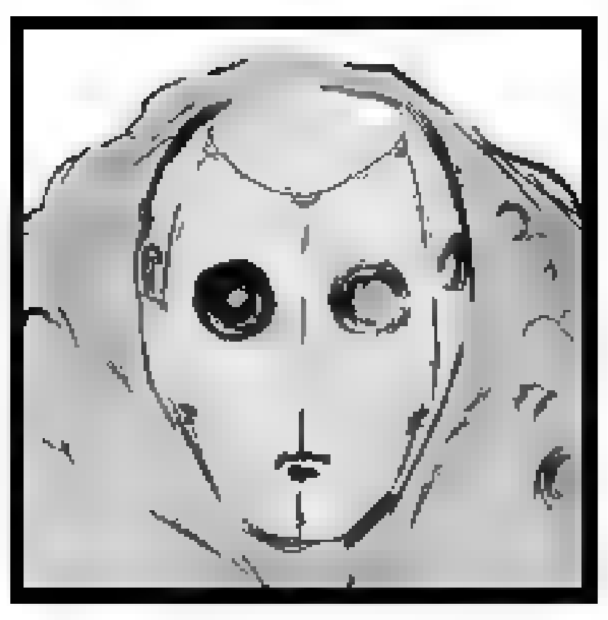
SICK BIRD

She of brittle bones, maned with tentacles of marrow and nerve. Her spine-spikes bring sepsis and mock coagulation, worming their way to your spine. Invading that sacred cord, she finds communion, knowing the whole of you.



MUDGEAR THE RECANTER

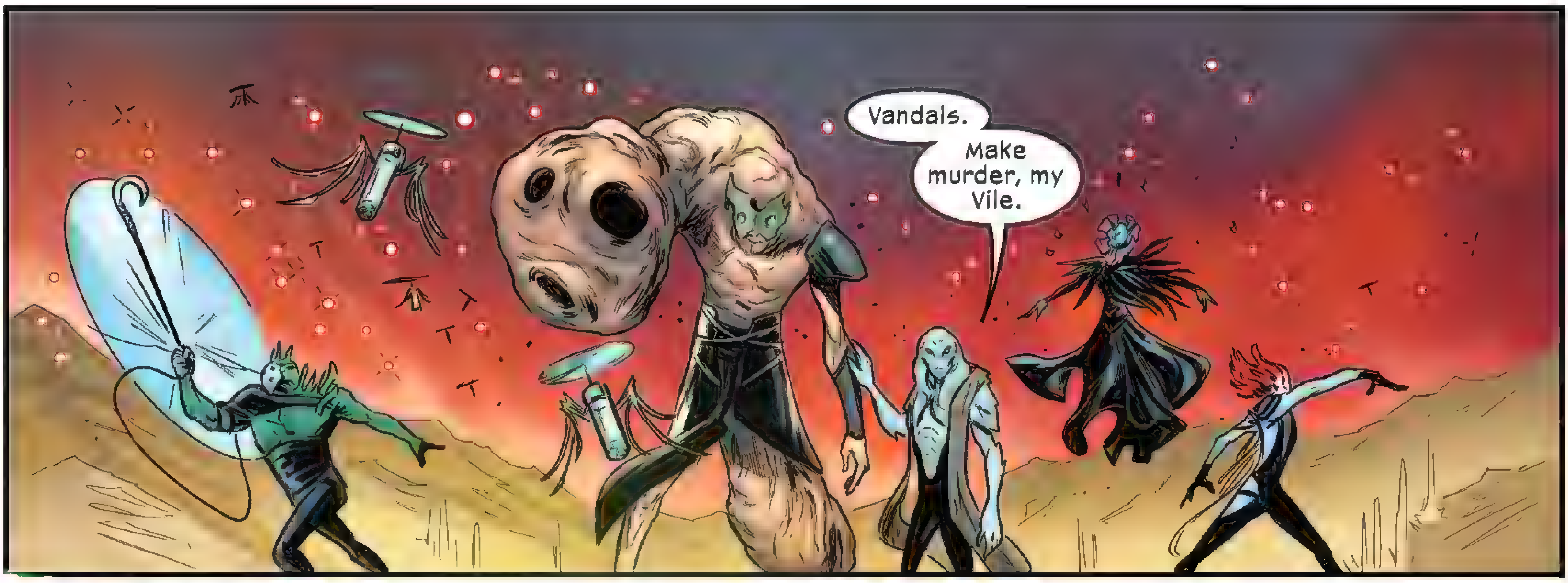
The tumored one, whose gift will bring him death. But first, his enemies'. From each orifice of his disfigured arm, a geyser of death. Praise Tarn!

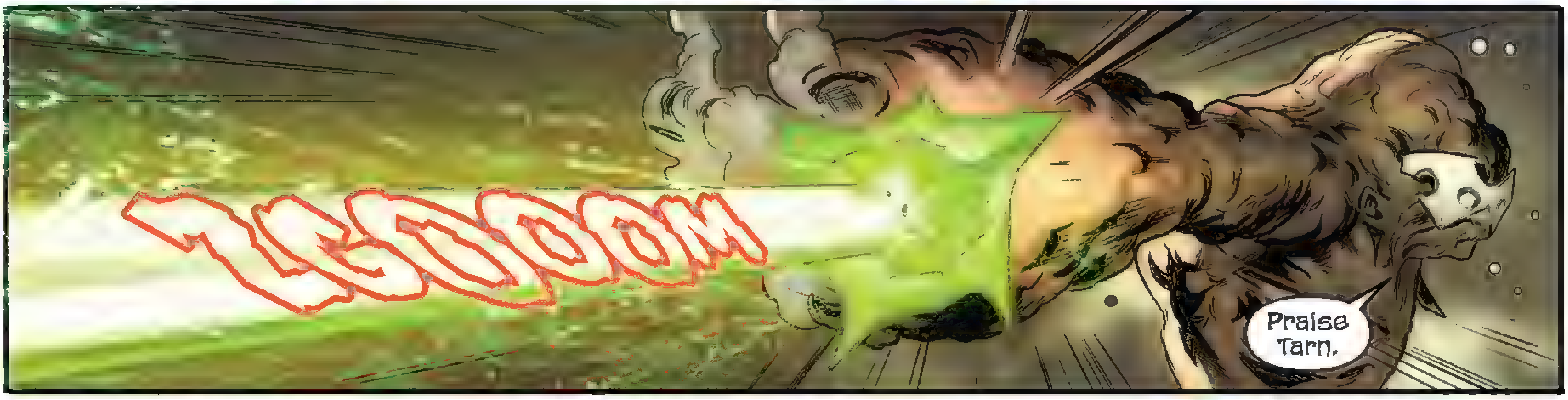


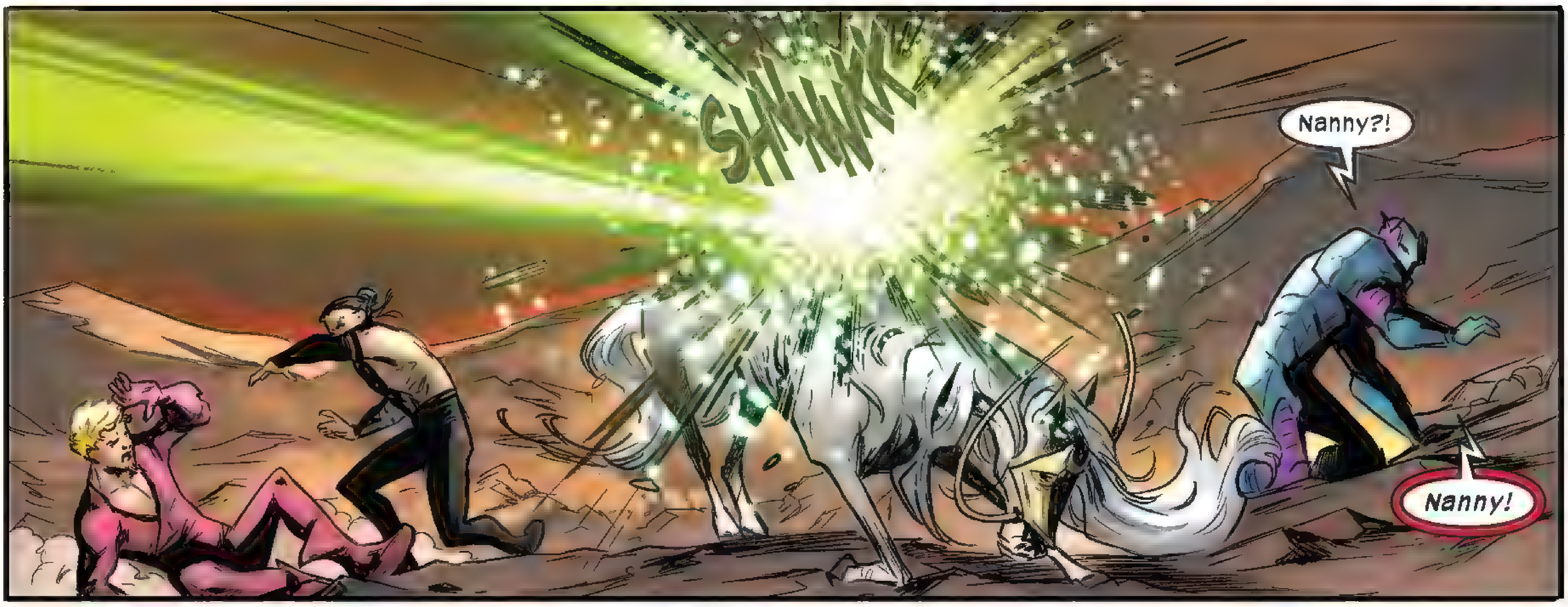
AMINO FETUS

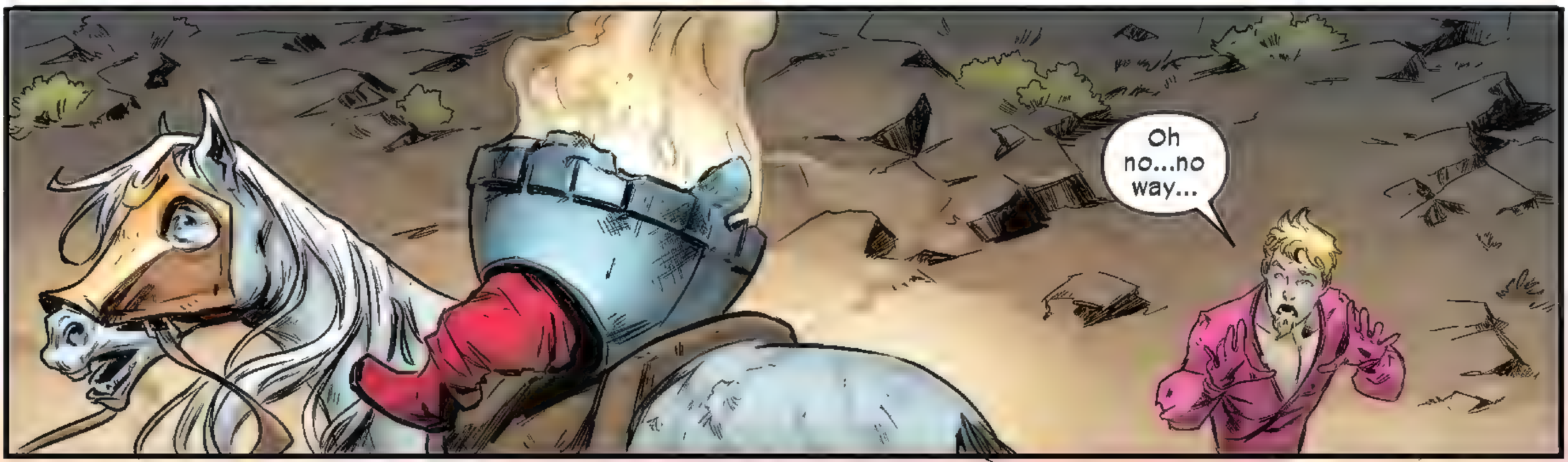
The Lumbering Shame, whose touch snuffs the ember of mutation. Know his grasp, know humiliation. But, most vitally, know this: Amino Fetus must not eat.

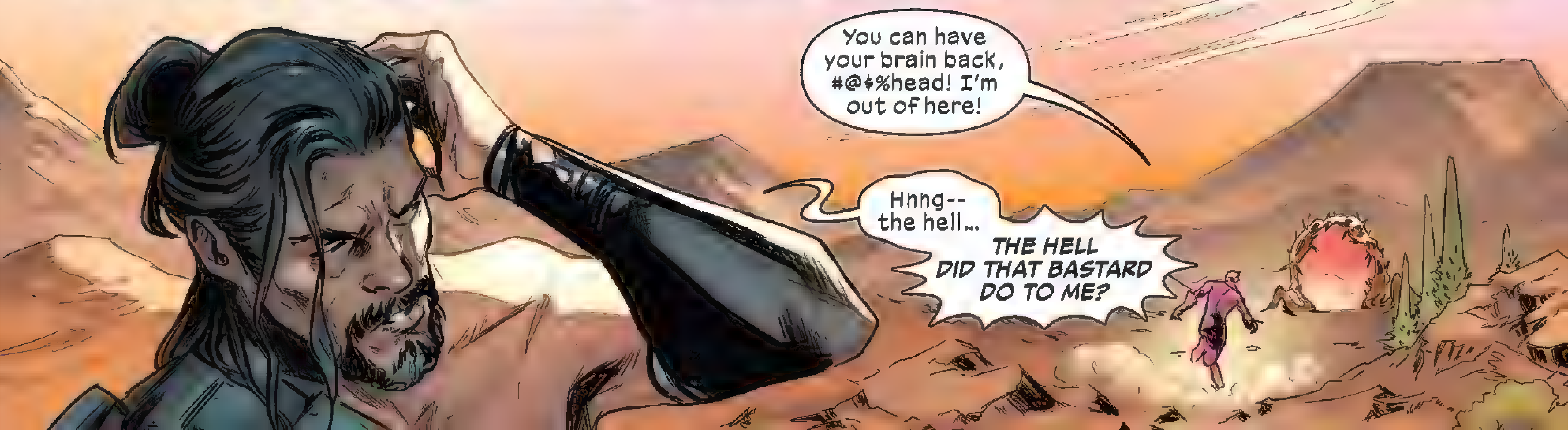
We should go.
Now.
They're beautiful.
Yes, beautiful and *mine*. Their mutations exalted then defiled by me, the great Genomic Mage. Tarn the Uncaring.
I've seen the desire of your heart, pale one. I know it well. I also came to Arakko to plunder while Genesis feuds.
But rid yourself of the notion you will pluck the Vile for your garden. This is *my* work. I have signed their souls.
Sinister--he's talking to you.
Hey! Are you listening?!
Yes, yes, I am listening...
...to my heart!
GCDs* ACTIVATED.
*Genetic Collection Drones. --MB
BZZZZZZZZZZ


Vandals.
Make murder, my Vile.


ZSOOOM
Praise Tarn.


SHNNKK
Nanny?!
Nanny!


Oh no...no way...


You can have your brain back, #@$%head! I'm out of here!
Hnng-- the hell...
THE HELL DID THAT BASTARD DO TO ME?

NEEEEEEE!
Gyuuugh! ‡SOB‡ You're bad!
BAD, BAD, BAD!
BUDDA
BUDDA
BUDDA
Defensive fire! Move back! We're getting out of here!
Sounds like a--
SHH
Yum.
guh...
You're okay, brother.
BUDDA BUDDA BUDDA
B-bleeding.
Oh man.

--GAK!
SLICE
Come. Be known before you die.
Wild Child.
Go low.
Grrrr...
B AARRR!
SHUNK!
I gift you the forever shhhh.
EAT POOP, MEAN LADY!
BUDDA
BUDDA

GOR GOR.
Stay away from my friends!
BUDDA BUDDA
GOR.
Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow.
SCLORCH!!
Amino Fetus...
PUT IT DOWN!
He's going to feed.
GOR GOR.
Nanny...
NO! DOWN!
DON'T LET HIM EAT!

THEY'RE TEARING US APART, SINISTER!
Not to worry-- I'm almost done!
=Kaff=
Here. This must make it back to Krakoa.
Go! Now!
You've lost your mind!
You take care of this package, and I'll continue taking care of yours.
That's the deal... isn't it?
...
Wild Child, Greycrow and Havok are injured.
We need time.
I'll do good. Watch me?

RAARRRR!
What a good boy you have there. Very loyal. Heartbreaking scene--
Now move! Get the prize to Krakoa!
Ah, what a sweet boy.
AIEEEE! AIEEEE!
Yum, yum!
Prime cuts!
AIEEEE! AIEEEE!

What an odd creature you are...
Hey! I'm already insecure about the cape! I don't need you throwing it in my--
GARK!
Touched by brilliance, *mutilated* by madness.
This, I would admire.
But you stole from me, so the flaw becomes *tragic.*
Tragic indeed.

[SILK].. .HELLIONS 07]
[MANE]....XOS...._0.18]

Priestess Gulivant,

I bring you news from the Pintok Hatchery of East Dryador, or what remains of it. I know Saturnyne wants her horse back, but after the contest, I pray our luminous majestrix remembers justice for these wellborn fishmen. But to the task at hand...

My scouts have combed the lands in search of the Omniversal Steed Princess Silkmane. They bring word our horse thieves grow desperate. After losing the brigands in the Feculent Forest, we're certain they traveled over the Bridge of Lost Sights in an ill-informed play to cross the unsanctioned gateway to Arakko.

They must have found Arakko as inhospitable as legend, for our Fear-Matron intuited half their number quickly returned and fled in the opposite direction. One struck out on his own, while three others set off together, one bleeding profusely.

The trio was next seen by a kindly river mage, who helped them cross the River of Golden Spawn. When discovered, they begged for his silence, which he granted for a day's time, as is the way of Obalk-Tok. They took a bearshark for food in the Alkaloid Steppes before disappearing into the Dry Sea of Hovering Kelp.

Two of my Twinlings caught the single pillager among the harvest of pearls, but he was anointed with some unholy luck, as my brothers began attacking EACH OTHER, overtaken with familial grievances. The Twinlings would have fallen in the fratricidal melee had they not been pulled apart by kindly shucker-dwarves. Sadly, the thief escaped.

The good news is the bandits are obviously rattled. I surmise they may try the Avalon gate (from where, dare I suspect, they came) hoping for a gentler reception on Krakoa's soil. If so, I have my best priestesses lying in wait.

You may ask why I report on everything BUT the horse. The answer is tragic, I'm afraid. I've found no evidence Princess Silkmane survived the thieves' journey to Arakko, and I cannot, in good conscience, send my scouts into that hell. This, of course, will have to be explained to the Omniversal Majestrix when I return.

If you'll excuse me, I plan to finish off the limesmead you so kindly gifted me at my training's end. Better to enjoy my last night in the Order.

Yours,

Priestess Joshanna of the Rangers

Avalon Gate.
The court of King Jamie.
We made it, Alex.
Lost too much blood. He's done if we don't get him to the *healing gardens*.
The dungeon doesn't have a garden, I'm afraid.
And you three are *very much* headed for the dungeon.
We've come a long way, faced many horrors to reach the gateway home.
Standing between it and us is a mistake.
You're about to get #@$%&# up, is what she's saying.
Y-your words...they fill me with *terror!*
RUN!
GYAAAAH!
Hope you don't mind my stepping in.
Forgive us!

Manuel! You did it! You're a genius!
Oh, yeah, buddy. Good to see you too.
Heh. Had to do some terrible, terrible things to get here. Not terrible for *me*, of course.
You're weak. Must be starving. Holding the guards is taking it all out of you.
Oh. How can you--
SSLITCH
...tell?
Attaboy.
I know that hurts, but you better stay awake. You die here, your brain gets scrambled up for good.
You hear me? Pick up your guts and get goin'.
Crawl, $&%$#.

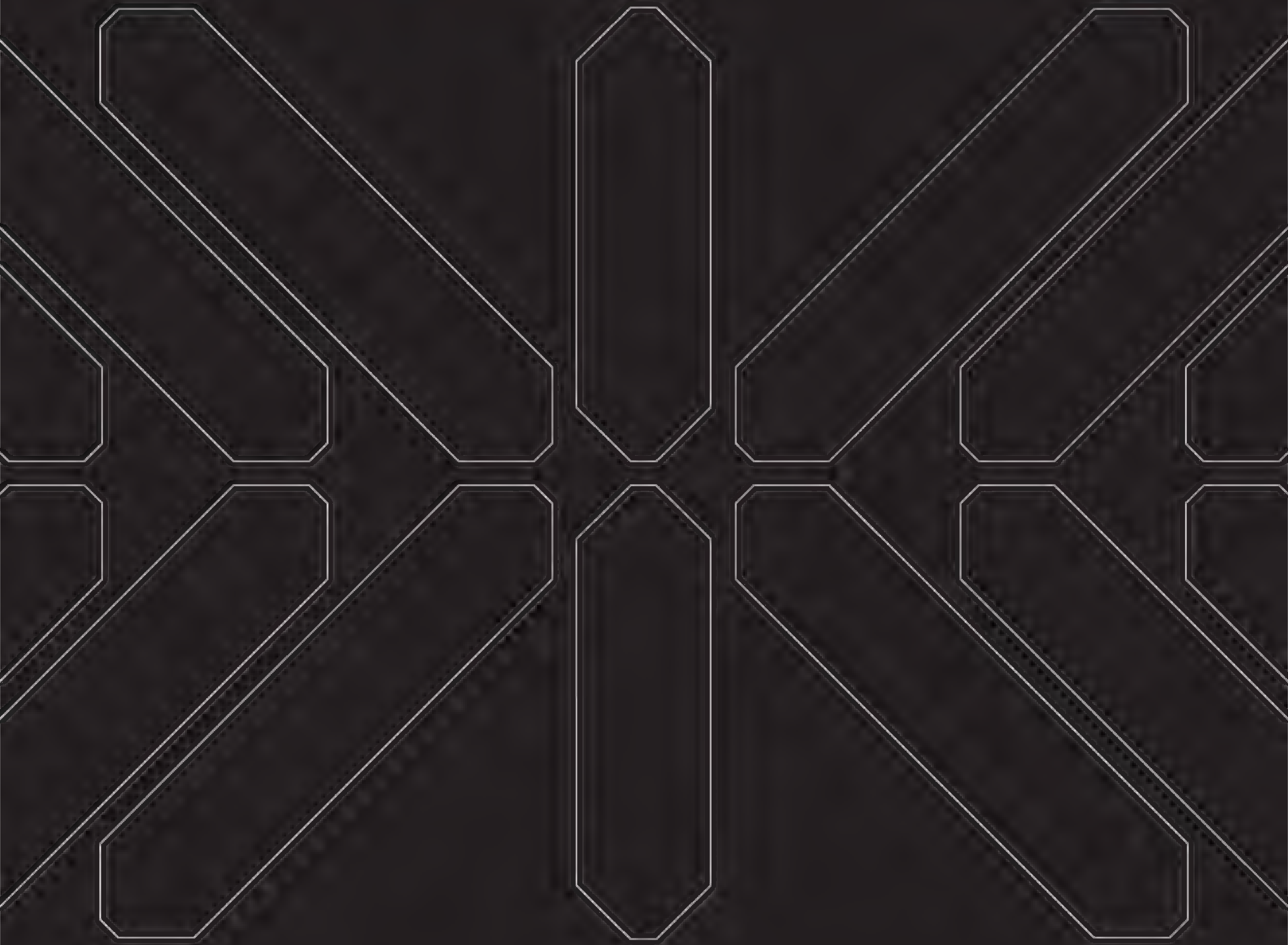
Krakoa.
Stay with me, Alex.
We're home.
Aaaah. That don't smell bad at all.
You never let me fall. Not once, Kwannon.
Thank you.
Hmmm?
SSSSSSSS
The hell...
What's this?
I don't know. Something's blocking my--
SINISTER!

HNGG!
SHLINK
BLAM
You crazy mother--
TEK
Glarghalighall...
TSSSSSSSSSSS

THUMP
La tee dee da, la da da...
You did such a great job. Thank you, my sweet.
Sorry for the smoke. It's just *everyone* has a camera now, you know?
...What are you doing?
Say, you didn't happen to see my *cape* back there, did you?
THUD.
Oh well.

La tee dee da, la da da...
RIP
There we are. And now...
Ahem.
My sweet holy god, help! There's been a terrible attack!
My precious Hellions...
They're dead!

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

noto

CABLE #6

[XOS] [CAB6]

DUGGAN
NOTO

PART 19 OF 22

CHAPTER

19

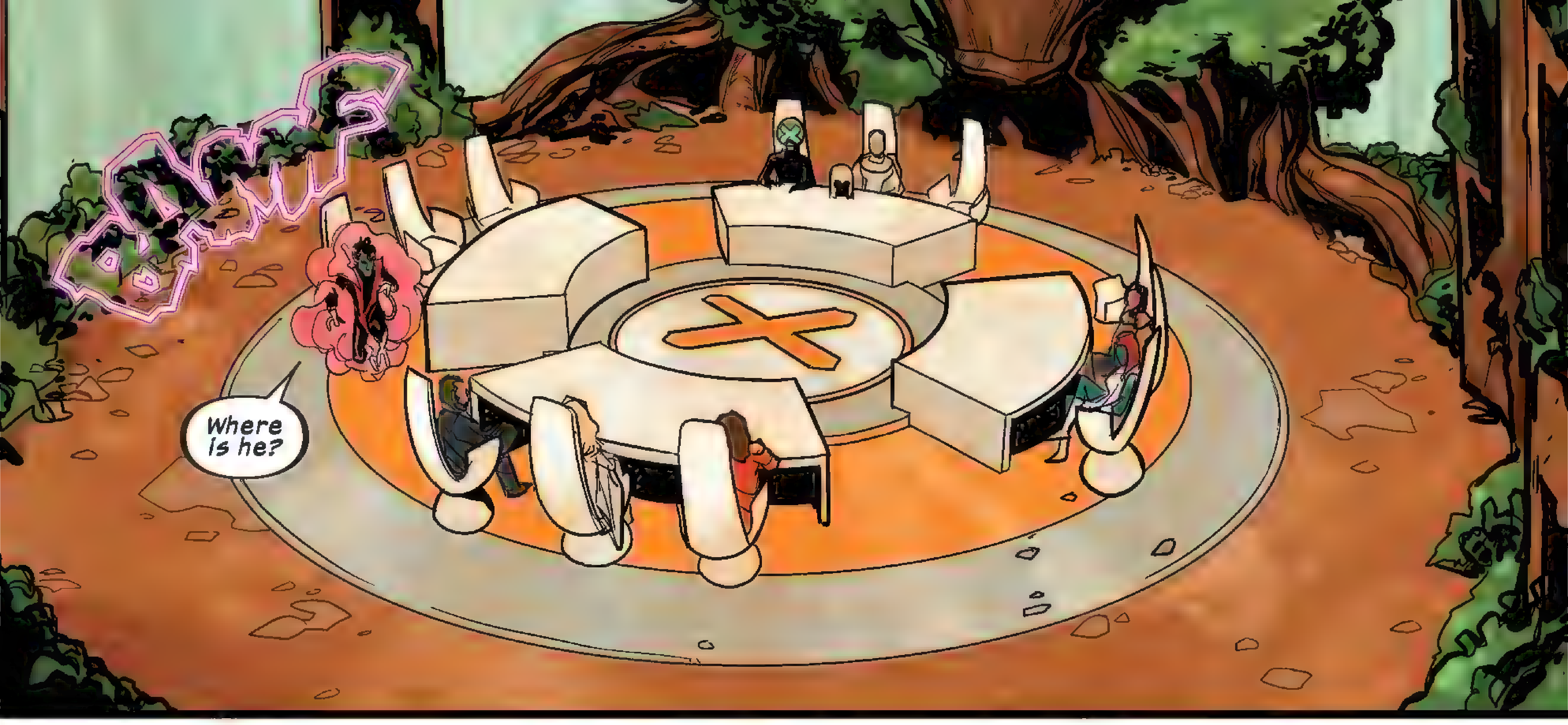
[cab_[0.6]
[le__[0.6]

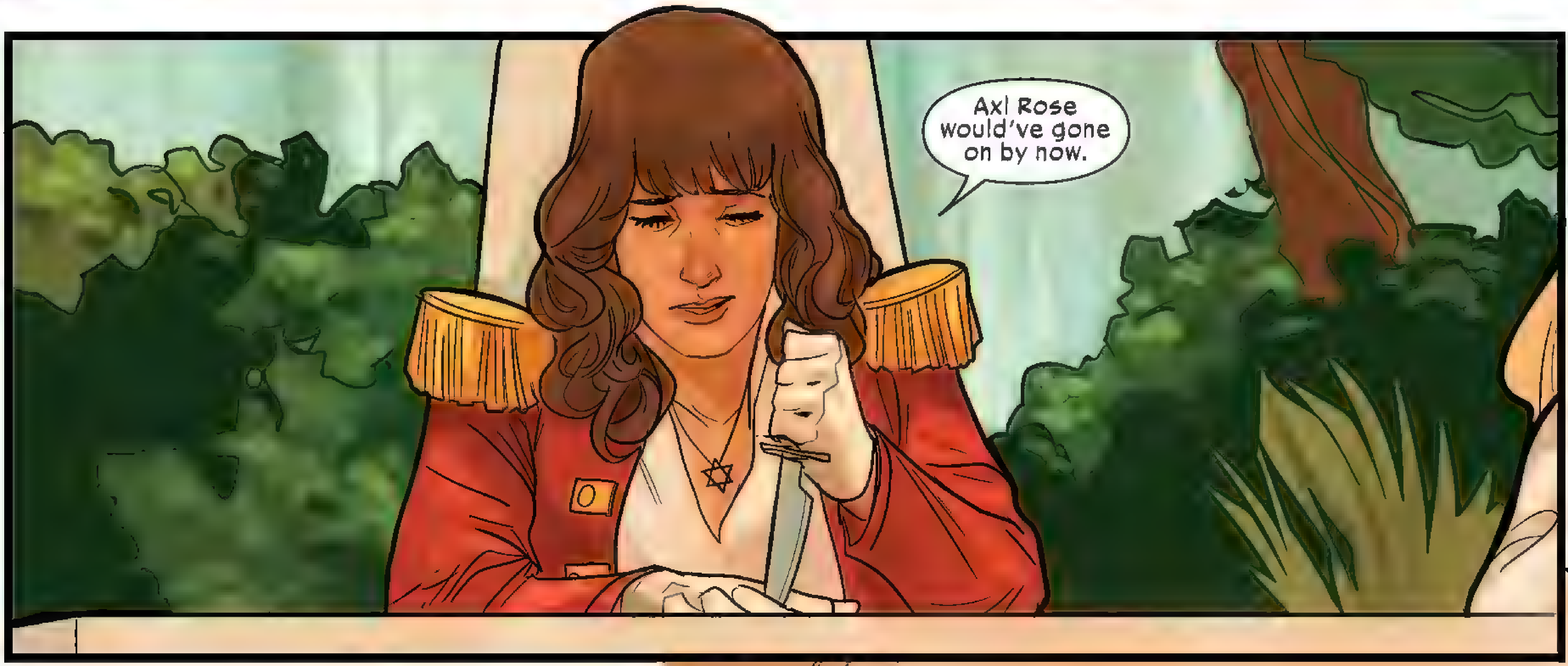
> The future will come fast enough, son.
> There’s no reason to rush it.
>
> -- SCOTT SUMMERS

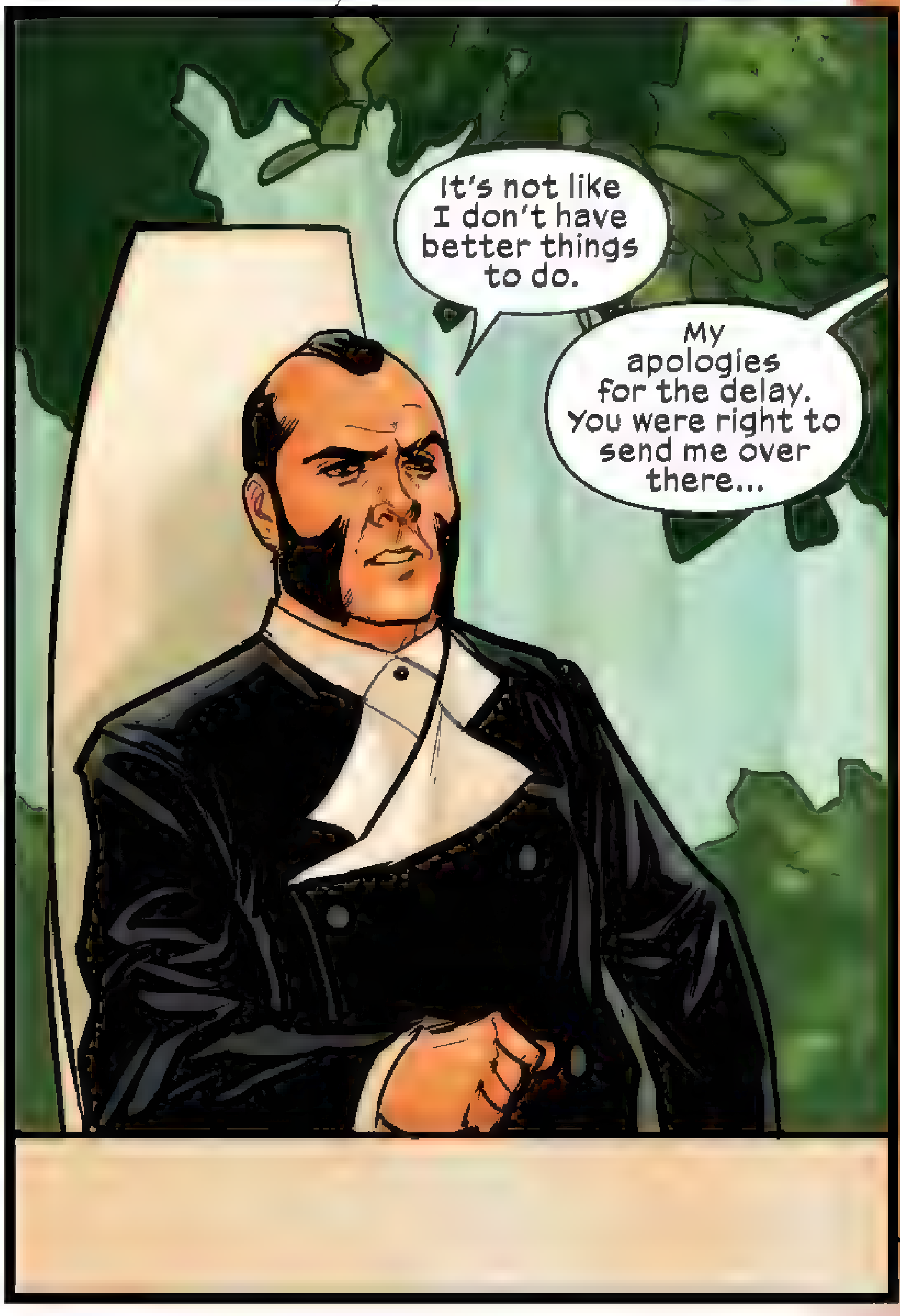
[cab_[0.X]
[le__[0.X]

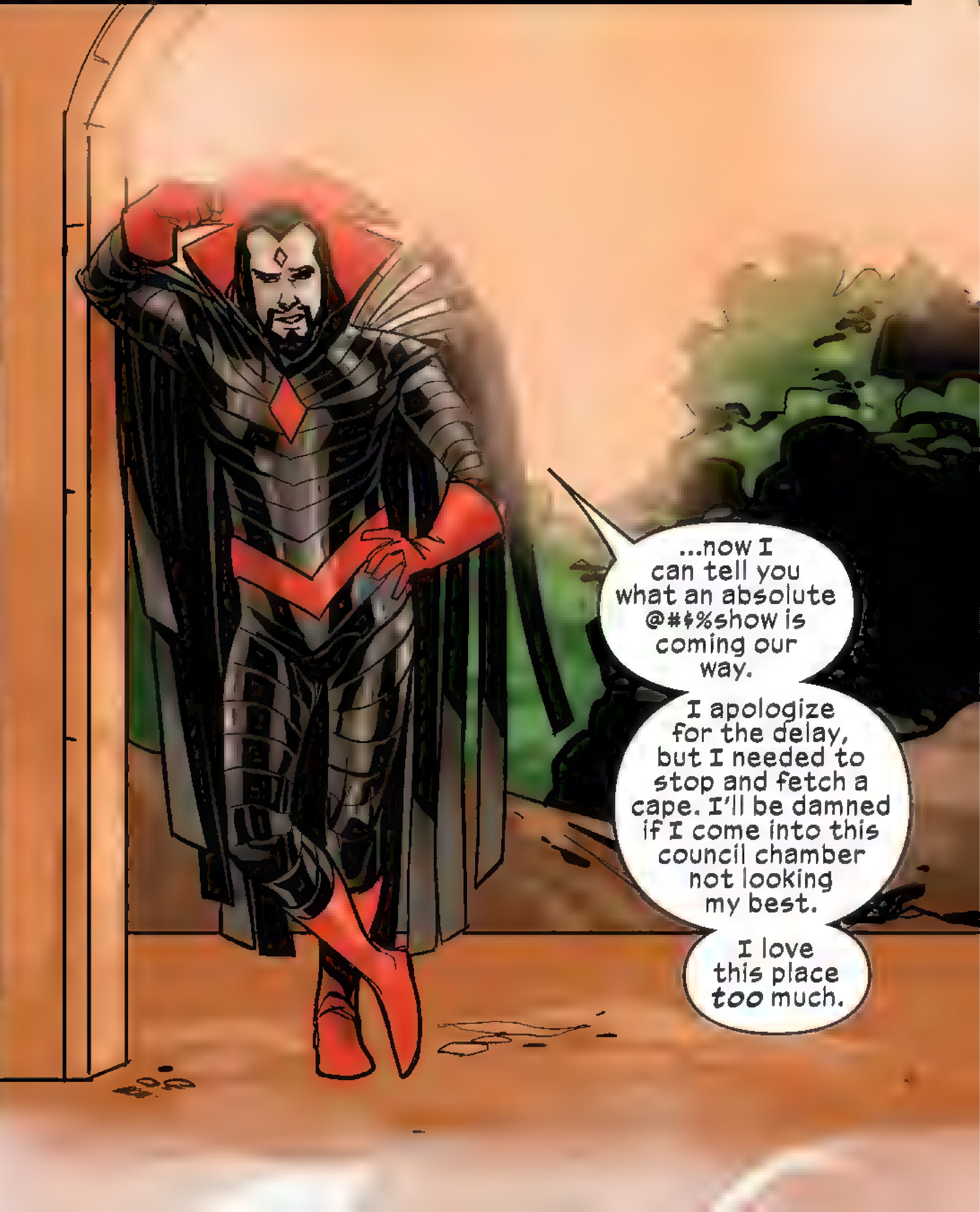
[cab_[0.6].....]
[le__[0.6]....]

[Cable_alpha...]


Where is he?


Axl Rose would've gone on by now.


It's not like I don't have better things to do.
My apologies for the delay. You were right to send me over there...


...now I can tell you what an absolute @#$%show is coming our way.
I apologize for the delay, but I needed to stop and fetch a cape. I'll be damned if I come into this council chamber not looking my best.
I love this place *too* much.

The situation is dire. Perhaps the War Captains should be here?
Not yet, Charles. I'd like to hear from Sinister before... matters escalate.
Very well, but I'd like Jean to be here.
Jean, I need you in the Council.
Jean?
Strange... she's not answering.
Excuse me... our people are in a death match with swords, your team was wiped out and you...
...stopped for a *cape?*
Excuse *me...*

...before Emma took pity on you, you looked like you were dressing yourself with the remainders from the Xavier School's *lost and found* box. So I don't think I'll take any fashion sass from you.
Well, that motion is...regrettably seconded.
Sinister, *please.*
Yes, yes. To the point: This Council was quite correct in *forbidding* anyone else to go over there.
Those maniacs have been at war for *thousands* of years. You should see what they did to the poor fish-people.
Actually, you really *don't* want to see it.
If our people are in danger, then let's go get them the hell out.

You're not *listening*.
Nobody that went over there swinging a sword over their head is coming back...
...we're already short a few Council members, but we have a much more immediate problem.
Once those Arakkii mutants chew through Saturnyne and Otherworld, they're going to come here.
We should blow up the gate and prepare to be invaded.
Harming the gate is... not currently an option.
Hoping the external gate will hold is a mistake...
...that could cost us everything.

Otherworld.
Welcome to the former kingdom of Dryador. It has seen much violence, and today its curse continues for two fights to the death.
The first contest is Cable of Krakoa...
...and Bei the Blood Moon of Arakko.
Arakko leads in the tournament 17 to 6.
All I ever really wanted is to make my dad proud...
...but there's a bit more than Summers family pride riding on me this morning.
Begin!

HNNH!
She's fast.
AAH!
She's strong.
GRRAAAARGH!
She's good.
She's not as good as me.

KRAKKOOM!!
AARHGH!
Ughn!
One chop under the nose. It'll be a clean kill.
Then I'll step between her and Doug so he doesn't have to watch her die.
DO IT, BOY!
KIYAH!
WHAKK

GAH!
MMPH!
⸗GASP⸗
HRRNN.
I flinched for just a split second--how could it go so wrong?
KRAK
Dad.
Stop!

Stop-- please.
Enough. The kid's beat.
I declared this fight was to the *death.*
All I ever really wanted is to make my dad proud.
However... some deaths are of the *spirit.*
You may stay your blade. Point: Arakko.
ARAKKO 18 · KRAKOA 6

Dad...
...Mom... can you hear me?
Please tell me you can hear me.
Nnh.
Is it Charles again?
Nathan, I'm with your father. He can hear you too. I can feel you're hurt. **Breathe** into the pain.
I'm so sorry. I screwed up. We're... we're gonna lose. It won't even be close... It's not a fair fight. It's like the witch **wants** to run the score up against us for some reason.
Right now we're down 18 to 6.

And I... I'm not... I wasn't ready, Dad. I shoulda been the **other guy** for this. Things would be different.
Son. Forget all that. Who hurt you?
I forget her name...but it was Doug's large wife.
You guys need to prepare for war. They're going to invade.
Could you tell Esme and the girls that I--
I've tolerated this spying for long enough, I think.

Nathan!
She severed our connection.
...But maybe working with Emma and the girls...we could punch through together.
What... what have I let happen?
I can't lose him again, Jean.
Scott...
Let's go fix it.

The score is 18 to 6.
The cards have determined the next contest.
Gorgon versus the *White Sword*...to the death.
You will face me... *after* you make it through my swords...
...all one hundred of them.
Ha.
Number one!

Two and three!

KIYAH!
BRAVO!
FOUR, FIVE AND SIX!
THIS ISN'T FAIR!
Nothing is fair, boy.

AAGh!
Hcuk!
AAH!
DIE!
AARGH!
AAAEEEIII!
Excellent.
Send them all.

Huff
Huff
Come--
--AND DIE!

AAUGH!
By my count, Gorgon has slain 13 of the White Sword's champions, giving Krakoa a narrow lead of 19 to 18.
Curse you!
Finish him, White Sword!
Before he does any more damage!
Please.
I was just waiting for you to grovel.
HOLD.
The White Sword stands before you, Gorgon. Your life is slipping away.
S-so it is.
In a moment, it will all be over.
When it is done, I will restore you, and you will serve me.

Never... I w-walk... my own path.
I could impose my will.
Not... over me.
HA!
So be it.
That is how a mutant dies, children.

One point is awarded to Arakko.
The score has been evened at 19.
And now the cards will reveal the next contest. We shall--
ARAKKO 19 - KRAKOA 19
There's no need for your theatrics, witch.
We know what comes next...

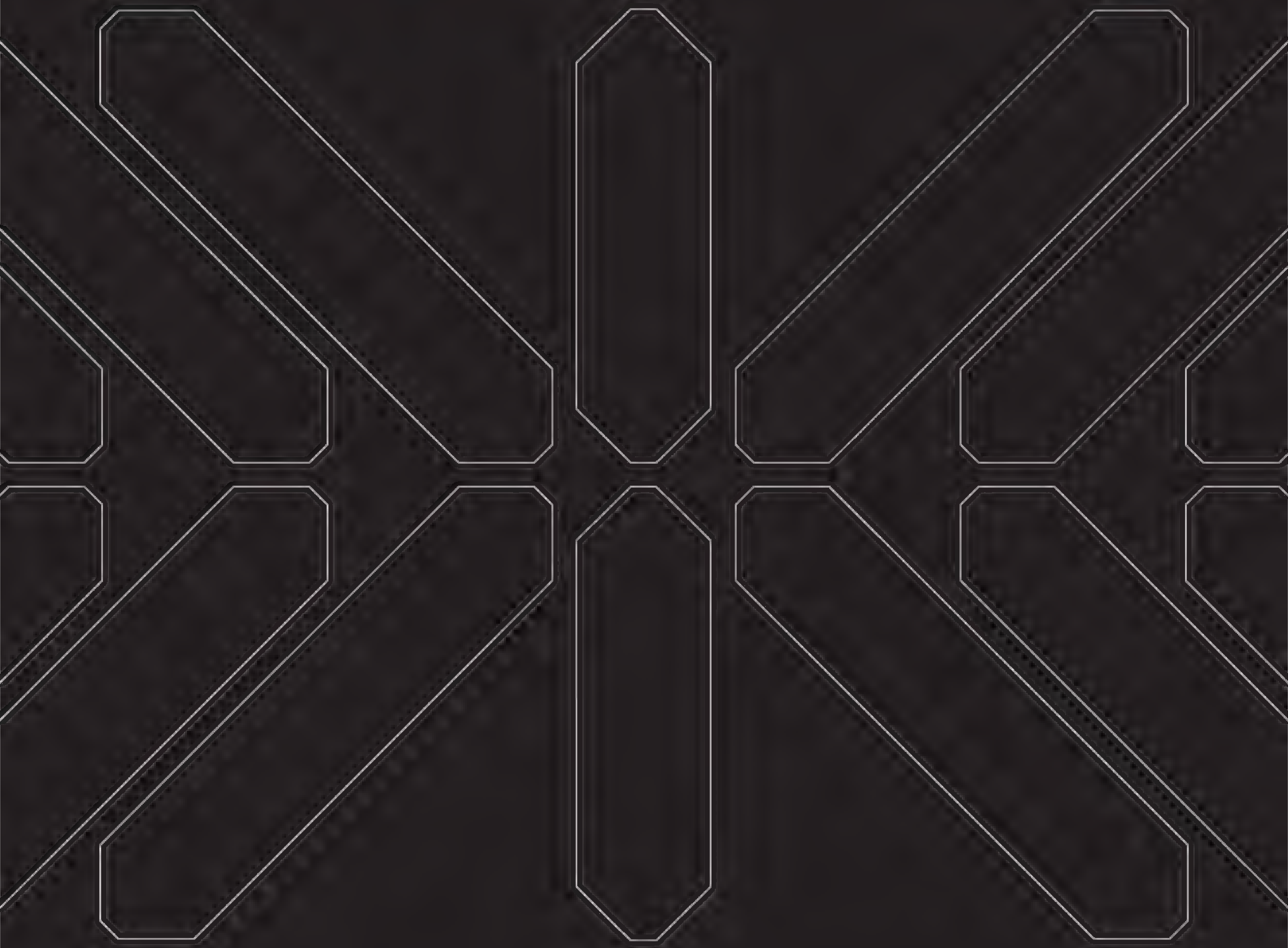
...it is a duel fated millennia ago.

[BAT ..[001]_01]
[TLE. ..[001] 06]

BATTLE LOG

#	Contest/Competitors	Winner	Score
1	**BATTLE TO FIRST KILL** Isca the Unbeaten vs. Captain Britain	*Arakko*	**1-0**
2	**TRIAL BY WEDDING** Bei the Blood Moon vs. Cypher	*Points to both*	**2-1**
3	**CONTEST OF ARMS** Pogg ur-Pogg vs. Magik	*Arakko*	**3-1**
4	**RACE TO DEATH** Summoner vs. Wolverine	*Arakko*	**4-1**
5	**CONTEST OF CUPS** Storm vs. Wolverine	*Krakoa*	**4-2**
6	**AMPUTATION** Solem vs. War	*Krakko*	**5-2**
7	**UNARMED COMBAT** Pogg ur-Pogg vs. Magik	*Krakoa*	**5-3**
8	**TORTURE ENDURANCE** War vs. Cable, Captain Avalon & Gorgon	*Arakko*	**6-3**
9	**CONTEST OF BOULDERS** Death, Isca the Unbeaten & Pogg ur-Pogg vs. Magik	*Arakko*	**7-3**
10	**BATTLE BENEATH THE WAVES** Isca the Unbeaten & the White Sword vs. Gorgon	*Arakko*	**8-3**
11	**CONTEST OF PLATES** Redroot the Forest vs. Cable, Captain Avalon & Cypher	*Krakoa*	**8-4**
12	**LORD OF THE DANCE** Bei the Blood Moon & War vs. Cypher & Wolverine	*Arakko*	**9-4**
13	**LABYRINTH ESCAPE** Redroot the Forest & Pogg ur-Pogg vs. Captain Avalon & Storm	*Arakko*	**10-4**
14	**JIGSAW BATTLE** Death & War vs. Gorgon & Magik	*Krakoa*	**10-5**
15	**CONTEST OF COUTURE** Redroot the Forest & War vs. Storm & Wolverine	*Arakko*	**11-5**
16	**BLIGHTSPOKE NAVIGATION** Isca the Unbeaten vs. Cable & Magik	*Arakko*	**12-5**
17	**FOOT RACE** Redroot the Forest vs. Captain Avalon	*Arakko*	**13-5**
18	**CONTEST OF LETTERS** Bei the Blood Moon, Death & Pogg ur-Pogg vs. Cypher & Magik	*Arakko*	**14-5**
19	**RUMINATION EDURANCE** The White Sword vs. Wolverine	*Arakko*	**15-5**
20	**RESIST TEMPTATION** Isca the Unbeaten & War vs. Gorgon, Magik & Wolverine	*Arakko*	**16-5**
21	**KITTEN KILLING** Captain Avalon vs. War	*Arakko*	**17-5**
22	**DRAWING FIRST BLOOD** Death vs. Storm	*Krakoa*	**17-6**
23	**BATTLE TO THE DEATH** Bei the Blood Moon vs.Cable	*Arakko*	**18-6**
24	**ONE HUNDRED TO ONE** The White Sword vs. Gorgon	*Points to both*	**19-19**
25	**FINAL CHALLENGE** Annihilation vs. Apocalypse	*?*	**?**

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

X-MEN #15

[XOS] [X15]

HICKMAN
ASRAR
GHO

PART 20 OF 22

CHAPTER
20

Krakoa.
Are they ready?

Yes. Everyone's waiting for us.
Are *you* ready?
I never thought we'd have this, Jean.
This place. Our family together. A real home.
I mean, I dreamed of it...but what good has that ever done us?
Not much.
Not much at all. But here it is.
Here we are.

Okay. You look *ready.*
For years, all we had was a little hope and a lot of prayer--it was ***nothing,*** and that whole time I never stopped fighting.
So what do people expect we're going to do now that we actually have something to fight for?
Exactly.
Let's go get our boy.

One hour ago, our son, Nathan, cried out for us to *save him.*
And now there's a voice in my head screaming... *why am I still here?*
But I already know the answer...
I know their answer. *"Because what we've built is bigger than what you want."*

Otherworld.
The Starlight Citadel.
And so, we come to the end of it.
Fitting that we are tied, even more so that it falls to the both of you to decide how all this draws to a close.
Husband against wife...
Will one of you yield, or will one of you die?
Let's find out.

If I am to die--*and die at your hand*--is it really to be like this?
With your face hidden from me? Behind that *mask?*
Yes.
No. I'm not hiding anything, my love.
I simply hoped to spare you the shame of looking in my eyes as you remembered who between us is *fit*...
...and who is *not.*
Shall we dance?
CLANGGG
"It's hard not to *see it*...it's impossible not to *feel it*..."

...it seems that bad days have yielded to even worse days. *I sense the urgency in your mind, Jean.*
What's happened?
We've heard from Nathan. He reached out to us from Otherworld.
Two telepaths--*even of your strength*--shouldn't be able to span that chasm...it would take enormous--
Desperation. Yes.
He's hurt. We think badly. Our connection was severed before we could find out everything.
And in spite of the position we find ourselves in--*at the whim of Saturnyne's rules*--you want to go get him?
I am going to go get him.
But that's not the whole of it, Professor.
Krakoa is...*at risk.*
Well then, sympathies, of course, but perhaps lead with that instead of whining about your personal misfortune.

...
We are losing. *Badly.*
Unless something unexpected happens, their army is going to be coming through the External Gate...
...and--*under the rules we've agreed to*--there's nothing we can do to stop it.
How badly?
Not clear. And, again, we were cut off before he could say...
...but the hopelessness in his mind...it was...
Understood.
Can I assume you have a course of action in mind, Cyclops?
I do. It's pretty straightforward.
I'd like to take a strike team--*one large enough to shake Otherworld to its foundations*--on a smash-and-grab to get our people back.
You intend to go through the Avalon gate?
Things are *fluid.* It's an *option.*
...
Best of luck.

The plan... is we get our people out.
And then we close the gates for good.
Cutting us off... *forever?*
Or until something better comes along.
It's certainly bold talk, but I hear a lot of hope and bluster there and no actual evidence that you can succeed.
Not the violence part, of course--*I know you have that in you*--but the closing of the gates. How do you mean to do that?
Beast recently stole the technology from Hordeculture to hijack gate control from Krakoa.
We can shut it down if we need to.
So...save our people then close the gates to save our nation.
Does that ***cover*** *it?*
It does.
Do you want to explain to him the giant gaping hole in his heroic plan?
I think you should. You tend to use ***small words***. It's easier for them to ***follow***.
You're assuming success, Summers...
...without accounting for what it might cost if you fail.

Look at me, Exodus.
I am the mutant who has yet to fail this council. Do you think I plan to start now?
That's *bravado*, son. Well earned, of course, but still...
He made a *fair point*.
There's no talking me out of this.
Then we wish you well... brave boy.
We will not see your kind again.
You forget. He won't be *alone*.
I'm going too.
And I think I'll join in as well. Frankly-- *with all this talk of swords*--I'm offended I wasn't invited in the first place.
Count me in too.
Actually, I think we can't allow that. *You...or them.*
What?

This is the government of a nation. We simply cannot lose so many of us in one moment of righteous madness.
Failure, death and a flawed resurrection could result in a broken council. I demand that we vote on this...
And I vote that leaving means losing your seat, for this body must endure, no?
Show of hands?
So it's settled. If you leave...you're done here.
I won't lie. I'm disappointed...
...but you can't honestly think that's going to stop me.
I'm going.

And I will be joining yo--
No. You should ***stay.***
You're the soul of this place.
Look at what's happening already...these people would be lost without you.
But thank you, Kurt.
Well, that won't work on me, Jean. I'm a ***troublemaker*** looking for ***trouble.***
And I won't be talked out of it.
Kate...we're traveling through a gate.
...
@%&#!
You really shouldn't *lie* to Katherine, love... *lying* doesn't suit you.
Do you want me to come?
Emma... we both know you're staying.
There's too much money on the table for the ask...so I would ***never ask.***
No. It's the same as the others. You need to ***stay.***

I'll have the girls meet you.
Thank you.
Okay, then.
We'r--
You've forgotten something, Summers...
The cost. The problem is if you go and fail--*if you die*--we could lose you and those who go with you forever.
Acceptable to some, I'm sure...quite unacceptable to others.
I'm assuming you will expect us to keep the gate open for you. Which means that if you fail, we'll actually be holding the doors open for an invasion.
Which is *foolish.*
We have our nation to think of.
We have a *duty.*
Then let's vote for this as well and be done with it.
All for closing the gates?
I'm sorry, Scott.

I'm sorry. But I don't have the luxury of thinking of just one mutant anymore, Scott... or even a few.
No matter how much they mean to me.
I understand, sir. Just like I'm sure you understand this vote doesn't change what I ***have to do.***
I know the difference between ***right*** and ***wrong,*** and I know that *necessary evil* has ***nothing*** to do with it.
I know these things because it's how I was ***raised.***
Yes. It is.
What are you going to do, son?
I know that risking everything we've built for a few lives doesn't work for all of you. I understand you don't have the luxury of thinking that way. *I really do.*

"But hearing you say it out loud...
"...tasting it in my mouth...
"I find it unacceptable.
"So I do not accept it."

You formed the *Quiet Council* to be the *government* of Krakoa.
Well...the *X-Men* are its *heroes.*
And we will save those who need saving. *Whatever the cost.*
You ready?
I've been waiting on you, dear.
Good boy.

KRAKOAN GOVERNMENT

THE FOUNDATION

—

[An organizational report prepared in the week following Krakoan Independence]

—

At the formation of the Quiet Council as the ruling body of Krakoa, the divisions of mutantdom -- of society -- were baked in to permit the naturally occurring fractures of competing ideologies, and the Quiet Council represents the best efforts of mutant elders to produce a government that is wholly representative of the citizens of our nation.

The Summer, Spring, Winter and Autumn seats represent not only a cross section of personalities and belief systems, but also a psychological spread of predictable mutant responses to internal and external conflicts. It is our hope that through this we can control disharmonious [and unnecessary] aggression that could possibly work against the best interests of Krakoa.

To that end, only the FORCE protocol of a national surveillance and defense apparatus will be allowed to operate as a fully functioning first-strike mechanism. We will establish a group of Great Captains to act as the military leaders in times of national need, or in response to a time of conflict or war.

NOTE: The only exception to this is Krakoa itself [and its voice, Cypher], who stand outside the governance of our mutant nation.

[FORCE]..................[X]
[X_MEN]..................[O]

REGARDING THE X-MEN

Furthermore, it is the suggestion of this body that the familiar moniker of the Xavier School should be eliminated. This Council sees no need -- and only potential complications -- in the continued acceptance, and use, of the name "X-MEN" as an active term implying agents of mutantdom.

It is in the best interest of Krakoa -- and all mutants -- if the only authority and higher representation rests entirely with the Quiet Council.

This is delicate work we do. We cannot afford the slightest societal crack. So from this day forward, the X-MEN are no more.

NOTE: The familiarity of the term "X-MEN" makes its use unavoidable as it is often freely, though incorrectly, interchanged with the term mutant [especially among human allies and adversaries], or used to add a patina of mutant nobility to an individual who is already part of a noble race. It is therefore -- in the short-term -- best practice to simply ignore its usage while we transition away from the old models of celebrated mutant paragons.

You are *wounded* and *weak*, my love...
I give you *one last kiss...*
...and then I will hear your surrender and welcome you back to your rightful place... *by my side.*
KRASH
Will you yield, Apocalypse?
Yield?

I will *not* yield.
Not to fear.
Not to doubt.
And not to *love.*
AIIIEE!
KRAK
HRRKKK!
Though it be the *death* of me.

Go on...
Finish it. That's what I would do. Finish it, before the shame kills me.
Shame?
The shame would be me warring for thousands of years to see you again and this be the end of it.
CLANG
I don't want this.
I suppose that would matter if one were to care about needs and wants...
And even if I did, the day demands a victor, doesn't it? Things must be settled.
HRNNNN!

Put me on.
I don't... I...
Put me on.
Settled? Things are a long way from settled, witch.
I am not dead. I have not yielded.
Nothing is settled. ***Nothing.***

[kra_[0.0]
[koa [0.0]

All my choices have led me to this...

I regret *nothing* and I accept where this road leads.

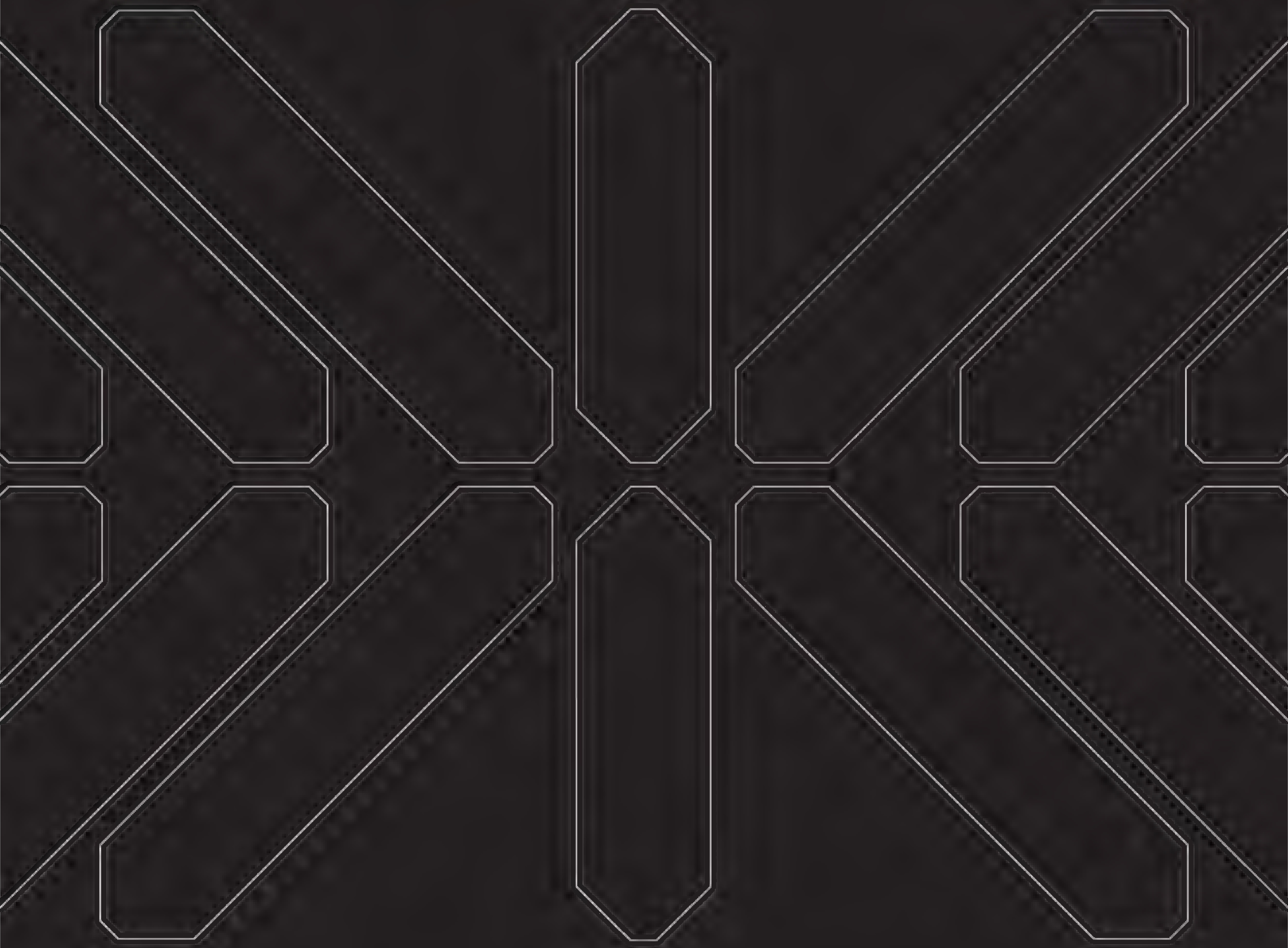
--APOCALYPSE

[ara_[0.0]
[kko [0.0]

[ame_[X.X]...]
[nth_[X.X]...]

[APOC_omega..]

[XOS....[0]_Crossover]



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[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

[00_Unite______]

EXCALIBUR #15

[XOS] [EX15]

HOWARD
ASRAR
CASELLI
GHO
ROSENBERG

PART 21 OF 22

CHAPTER
21

[excal_0.15]
[XOS _0.21]

Spellcasting is the art of directing magic with one’s willpower –

As such, magic is very eager to respond to the hearts of those in need.

Mistake your desires for true desperation, and a spell will teach you a lesson –

And magic is a harsh teacher.

-- SATURNYNE

[excal_0.15]
[XOS__0.21]

[excal_[0.15]....]
[ibur__[0.15]....]

[Excalibur_alpha.]

The Starlight Citadel.
rattle
-gasp-
"I am the birth mother of death-bringers.

Outside.
"When our children were young, I knew how fierce they would become.
"Yet a mother's love is such that it was my *honor* to put my body into their tiny mouths to feed them."
Knowing they would grow *sharp teeth to bite.* Knowing I would not sate their hunger for long...

...Knowing their need would only bow to blood.
I have had to endure these beasts--
--the squalling fruit of our union. From my own body, I have mothered them through *sickness* and *excrement* and *fits* and *rage*--
--and now, after all of these slights, I must suffer the *shame of your tears?*
I will feed them on this realm **and** *yours!*
SHHINK
KZZZT-KRAK-KRAK--

BOOOM
AAAAAAH!
She has summoned reinforcements that are coming this way. We are outnumbered--we must *move* now--
Do not *touch* me, *human.*
I will not run from my *wife.*
Are you nuts?! Buddy, I would totally run from my wife!
You deign to speak to me of love, you child, you simpering--
Apocalypse.
She will not be stunned for long.
And the storm cloud will not rage forever.

"We need to *move now* while their army is routed."
Stupid! Stupid, stupid, stupid--
Shut up, Pogg.
It may be chaos, but you're not making it any better.
=ptoo=
He speaks true.
This is not the fight I swore my men to. This is foolish.
What's the matter? Scared you can't repeat your previous record?
How many of your precious knights had to die before you stopped that blind old lunatic?

The Gorgon was a worthy competitor. My men who died were worthy too.
We'll sing of them as we drink to our victory.
You think you get to decide if your losses are worthy or not?
Battles don't keep count. *Soldiers* do.
Men! Form on me!
March!
We didn't come for a battle. We came for a *fight.*
And we won it.
You're *leaving?!* You *coward!* Where's your *bloodlust?* Don't you want to *kill* these mutant fools?
Drink *later!* On *their* island, while it burns!
The fires of war *will* swallow this land. We must make a decision or face getting caught in the flames.
They are down to, what, a *half dozen?* Decision made.
Let's *hunt them for sport.*
Bei!
What is she doing?!
That specific foolishness so precious to mortals.
"She's choosing *love over war.*"
SHHHNNK

Launch the siege defenses!
Moonward escadrille, to the perimeter! Now!
This way, my lady. Your study has been prepared.
Dreadful weather for a *siege.*
Keep up, dear.
RoOooOOoooooo
Shogo.
Don't defy me.
It's not safe for little boys to do that.

Good boy. Now quit sulking.
We don't have the time for it.
Yes, the box. Give it here.
TSHHHHHH
...There is much work to be done if we want to defend the citadel before things get any worse.

SPLUT
Now that Apocalypse's old lady is off our tail, I'm gettin' tired 'a running. I say we hold the line and take on the wave.
SHHINK
SNIKT
Yeah? How'd that work out for Gorgon?!
Or Betsy.
Or Rockslide?
Fair 'nuff. We lost too many to be reckless.
BOOOOOM
We are *vastly* outnumbered.
To leap into battle mindlessly now would be inviting a great defeat.
Now you're concerned about defeat?!
Betsy *died* for this *stupid* contest! We listened to the rules, and now they're *all thrown away!* She could have *lived!* Did you ever think about how this would *end?*

I thought about this every night for thousands of years. A *million* nights.
No matter what battle I had won that day, what greater mystery I had unlocked. No matter how many supple bodies lay beside me in my bed at night.
I am *always* thinking about how this ends.
WHISHHH
Look out--
WHAP
Huhhh--
RRRRRAHHH
You dare--
Don't!

Don't. Please.
She's my wife.
We are in desperate need of numbers.
Perhaps she wishes to join our side.
Is that so, Bei? Do you wish to aid your beloved and his compatriots?
Of *course* she wants to help. You guys don't know her at all.
Bei? What are you do--
BWOOOMMMMMM
Aaaah!
No, Bei!
Let me go--we need to help them!
Doug?!

Rooooo.
...No.
Don't make me get up from my seat, young man.
Come help me with this mosaic here.
I could use an eye in the sky for a better look.
What do you think?
I'm thinking it'll be the perfect addition to the room.
-SNRRRRT-
Oh, for heaven's sake. Put that away. *No dragonfire.*
Especially not in here. You start melting realities in this building and you'll be in *big* trouble.
But if you really want to let loose some *dragonfire*, well...

"...we can talk."
Do you see where she took Douglas?
I don't.
The thunderhead is weakening. We are running out of time before nothing holds the armies of Amenth back from us.
I see endless waves of them.
We've gotta find him.
That may not be possible, Magik.
Oh, @#$% you! I'm not going to die for your *family drama* and leave *Cypher* to the mercy of his *wife!*
Illyana, *please!*
We will endeavor to leave *no one* behind, but we must stay *as one.*
To be scattered means *certain death* for us all!
Sweet to fight over the *last Krakoan flesh--!*

THOK
THOK
THOK
THOK
THOK
THOK
THOK
THOK
THOK
THOK
Reeeeeeeeeee! Sssss!
THOK
THOK
My God.
Well, I'll be damned.
THOK
THOK
PAP
PAP
BOOM
Jubilee?! Hell're you doing here?! You were supposed to go home to Krakoa where it's safe, kiddo!
Without Shogo? Are you crazy? Looks like the Priestesses of the Green and I showed up just in time.
Priestesses?! Did Saturnyne send you?
She does not send us anywhere. But we will fight to protect the citadel.
Your friend Jubilee said the raging storm meant her friends were fighting for it too.

We need to get to the citadel. We're not going to survive this if we don't get Shogo's *help!*
We just need to go get him.
Shogo! That's *right!* He's a *dragon!* We have a *motherfreaking dragon in that tower.*
And what, bail on the ground? I get the feeling we're the last thing holding the line down here!
Logan is right, Jubilee. These armies are circling.
If the citadel falls, so do a great many realities. We have already lost so much.
That citadel? Is not my citadel.
But that *kid?* That's my *son.*
We will make the decision for you--we are bound to defend the citadel and must leave you here.
Fine. Then I'm staying.
Alas, Jubilee. This is where we part.
We must defend our home, and you must defend *yours.*
If anything happens to me down here...
He *likes* you guys so much already...
It would be our *honor.*
Let's hurry up and finish this.
I miss my *kid.*

Please. Please put me down.
Bei, I am not gonna lay hands on you in anything less than a loving manner, but you have *got to put me down!*
BOOF
Ow!
Okay, Bei, we have to go back there. Back to my friends.
They're already way outnumbered, but you can come *help* us!
What else am I gonna do! Go with you? I can't live where *you* live. I'll die! I can't even eat the bagels from the tree on Krakoa. They make my throat itch.
CLANG
You have to take me back to my friends.
You don't have to *leave* me there! Come *with* me. You can come back to Krakoa and stay at my place. We're *married,* aren't we?
You're already *my* hero, but if we go back there, you'll be *their* hero too. And that can't hurt.
My friends'll love you. They're gonna love you because... *I, um...*
FLUT FLUT FLUT FLUT
Aaaah!
You know what?
I'll tell you that when we get home.

Imbolc escadrille!
Send them back to Hell!
DIEEEEEE!
Hell yeah!
I think they're slowing the demon guys down!
Not likely. I've a bad feeling.
As well you should.
What is the army doing? I can see clear across the battlefield--that doesn't seem right--
Douglas!
Don't shoot! We're friendly! I promise!
‹I come in peace. I will fight alongside you and the man I have chosen as my beloved. We must steel ourselves for our final confrontation.›
Oh, I hope you're saying something good...
Eyes up, team Krakoa--
--looks like someone came to get their asses kicked.
There she is.

How embarrassing, Bei. To get caught on the *losing* team.
‹How embarrassing, Isca.›
‹To march with so many, and yet be so alone.›
You smell like *puke.*
And a great many other things, I assure you.
No more games, Pestilence.
It is clear that we have won. And it is time for our spoils.
I want first this land, then *Avalon,* then *Krakoa,* to burn like Dryador did.
Then I want to feast on the ashes and dream of the future: my next *lover,* my next *brood,* my next *conquest.*
And I want to erase your names, so that you are simply another failed experiment. And all that will ever be remembered of *Krakoa* and the great *nation of mutants* will be...
"...how easily you let yourselves be played like pawns."

The Majestrix's work was nearly done.
And so the call was sent to each reality, ancient and infant alike:
TING!
When the citadel calls, Captain Britain must answer.
In these shattered pieces lay the last of what had been the Starlight Sword, stolen from a deserving man by a determined woman.
Surely, with this spell, she would correct the wrongs that had been done to her.
Surely, while her castle rocked around her, she would not also have her *heart* besieged.
But when the citadel calls, Captain Britain must answer.

...NO.
For the sword was in the hand of Betsy Braddock...
...and there it would remain.
THUNK
NO...
Now and forever.
"NO!!!"

A LOVE SPELL

To restore the heart's true protector: to be cast in time of need.

Components:

A lock of hair from the intended

Stardust (collected during highest perigee)

The shattered heart of a great desire

Procedure:
At the west-facing front of the tallest structure reachable by the caster, step widdershins round whilst summoning thy intent. The height from which the spell is cast is proportional to the power of its use. But be wary and keep your eyes open -- many beasts seek lovers as prey and feed in high places.

Cast the lock of hair away.

Collect a pure heart shattered in time of greatest need. These can be difficult to obtain in a trying world, but can be prepared in advance by the caster if they cannot be found. It is a cruel and heartless thing to shatter one's greatest hopes for the love of another, but those unlucky in love are oft willing to sacrifice.

When your desire is greatest, assemble the shattered pieces. They will take the form of the heart's true protector.

Be patient and await your answer.

Warning:
Love spells are typically cast by the young and foolish, and their inexperience and lack of power is often a blessing when the spell goes awry. Powerful casters are encouraged to utilize better judgment and other methodologies before resorting to love spells, as the backlash can be great.

Do not confuse true desperation with the ego of desire.

Larraz 2020
+ Marte Gracia

X OF SWORDS: DESTRUCTION #1

[XOS] [XOS-DS01]

HICKMAN
HOWARD
LARRAZ
GRACIA

DESTRUCTION

PART 22 OF 22

CHAPTER 22

[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

I will carry these burdens *forever*, and if not *forever*, then until the day I *die*.

--APOCALYPSE

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[ame_[X.X]...]
[nth_[X.X]...]

[APOC_omega..]

Otherworld. The Starlight Citadel.
At the *close*...all cards have been drawn but *one.*
Ash on the wind. Fire in the air.
There are *many* possible draws...
There is, however, only *one* possible outcome...
...and *sacrifice* has brought us to *this.*

Magic is fickle. But *fortune* was on their side.
The card is drawn...
...and the Corps is reborn.

My god...
Look up, mutants!
Look up!
The Captain Britain Corps has returned!

For this world.
For all worlds.
When the citadel calls, Captain Britain must answer.
Whatever the cost.

They have called down a host to war against us.
They have *summoned* an *army*.
Summon our own, War.
Yes, Mother.
Do you see the *sign?*

"Do you see?
"See what the school calls forth!
"See what hell the Summoners summon!"
Okay. That's not good.

How... how bad is it?
Are we losing?
Yes.
Why...why don't you do something?
You say that as if all this rests...on me. When it does not.
"You forget, young mutant. What was set in motion cannot be stopped. At the drawing, this conflict was preordained...
"You fight for love and hate, salvation and death...
"...damnation and eternity...
"...and none of these will be denied."
Hey, kiddo...
Dad!
Hang in there. I'm on my way.

So, Captain...
I take it things are *dire* and the weather's looking grim?
It ain't great. And honestly...you're cutting it pretty close.
I was worried you weren't going to ***make*** ***it.***
Difficult people, Illyana... ***complicated times.***
Wanna kick the door open for us?
Captain...it would be my ***pleasure.***
THUNNKK
RAARRRRRRR!

"This is simple. It's a straightforward job.
"We're here to rescue our people. To save our *friends*. To save our *family*."

Remember: To die here is to be gone forever.
We don't want to lose anyone.
So if you're wondering if you should hold back or restrain yourself in any way...
...don't.
It's win or die. *So we win.*
Jean... wanna take it from here?
To me...
...my *X-Men!*

ARRGH!
HRRNNNNN!
It's so hard to fight it...
Have you figured it out yet, my love?
I cannot bend because it would mean total surrender. I cannot yield because I would be yielding to it. The fight is all I have left. *Annihilation cannot be beaten.*
And you don't seem to understand that surrendering is not the same thing as losing.
I can heal the breach.
I can make us all whole.
I can make *us* whole.
You don't understand. I am so tired of this fight...
I am...
I am...
I am Annhilation!

SUMMONERS!
SUMMONERS!
Summon all of darker Amenth.
Every beast!
Every demon!
Summon it all!

It's over. *We've lost.* I'm too tired to do it myself... Can you put me down there? If this is how it ends, I want to be with my family.
What card were you dealt, boy?
... The Fool.
THE FOOL
Yes. A fool with a sword. And only a fool would think *that* is what he is *actually holding.*
... Oh god...I'm an *idiot.*
Mom! Dad! Illyana!
I need you to come get me. *Now!*

The S.W.O.R.D. Station.
All right. We're here.
Power it up. We'll be ready.
Give me the sword, son.
I'll do it.
No. I'm supposed to...
I can do it.
FWASHHHHH
Jean. It's on. Get ready...
Here they come.
NOW, Illyana!

By the heart of Amenth and the black halls!
Oh no...
AAIIIEEEE!

WE SUFFERED IN A DEAD REALM FOR FAR TOO LONG. PICKED ITS BONES. EXAMINED IT FULLY. NOW WE SEEK A HEARTIER MEAL.
You want the full measure of a world?
Come, creature...
...taste my mettle.
Feast on Amenth.
I will consu--
What?

This is *folly*, mutant. You cannot save *yourself.*
The *folly*... is believing that is what I'm *trying* to do.
RRRAAARR

Go on...
"Finish it."
No.

I... I...
I am... remade...
Apocalypse
Annihilation.
The end...of all things.

Mistress Saturnyne!
"The aliens from that other place are not just destroying the mages of Arakko and Amenth--they are tearing at the fabric of Otherworld itself."
You have to *stop* them.
Not yet.

Whoever defeats the helm, claims the helm.
Whoever wears that crown controls the land.
And the helm... *controls* them.
And now, my new vessel, raise my horde. Summon our full might. Lead them...
Lead them to ***victory.*** Over all who stand ***against us.***
...
No...
No.
Yes.
You cannot deny what you have won. Claim it.
I claim it.
But... but not you.
You think you can fight my will?
She couldn't and she's stronger than you--*fitter than you*--more than you.
She fought to win...
I...
I don't care about winning anymore.
I only want to save my people.
Our people.
Hrrrrnnnn.

What's that? It almost feels like... like...
What is this?
My god...*Isca the Unbeaten*...
"...she's *turned.*
"We cannot win."

What are you doing?
What has to be done.
Go on.
No.
No!
Do you see me, Saturnyne? Apocalypse... Annihilation...
I do.
Then see clearly...
...I surrender.
NOOOO!

Come, child.
Fly!
RARRR!
Let us put an end to this play.
"Dispose of all the players we no longer need..."

And let's settle all accounts of those who we do.
Now...
Are you sure you want to surrender?
After all, there's an entire Multiverse to conquer. All those worlds to annihilate.
Yes. We're done here.
Never. No.
Never.
-Sigh-
May I?
Please.
Nothing changes in regard to what's required. Whoever wields the helm controls the world.
And that world most certainly does need controlling...

...but this will make it more manageable. Still corrupting, of course...there's no satisfying that appetite, but at least now it won't have direct dominion over the wielder.
Any requests? It is yours, after all. Would you like me to shape it into a *sword?*
No, I think not.
Damn you. One day I will crack your bones and eat the--
Shhhh. You sound ridiculous. This is a better look for you, and a deeper lure if you want it.
On to other things.
The contest was settled and now so is this war...
Otherworld stands triumphant. Krakoa survives. Arakko-- *vassal of Amenth--* yields.
But...I am troubled by your precocious nature.
If there's something else you want, lady... there ain't much left in the tank.
He's not wrong.

I require one mutant from each side to leave their own land and live with the enemy.
You want an exchange of prisoners?
I want-- *no, I demand--* a show of good faith.
Lady Genesis...
What mutant do you choose from Krakoa to join you on Amenth?
Can I choose you, my love?
Yes. But I have to warn you... I have changed. I am not the same mutant you left behind long ago.
I know. I see what you truly are...
And who speaks for Krakoa?

Normally the Council would--but this was war, and in war I--
No.
In this, I speak for Krakoa.
Ah. Symmetry. As glorious as ever.
Pick the mutant who takes your place, Apocalypse.
I choose...
I choose the mutant island of Arakko.
It's my understanding that the mutant island of Arakko contains mutant prisoners that number in the millions.
Are you sure that's what you want?
Yes.
That wasn't in the cards, Apocalypse...
Nicely done.

Very well, it is finished. As was seen, as was foretold.
Now begone with you...
"...and dare not brave this place again, unless you seek peril...
"...or adventure...or all the wild things of these wild lands."
Apocalypse...
You didn't have to do that.
...
Of course I did.
Anything you want me to tell the Professor or Magneto?
Just one thing.
"That I will see them again.
"Someday."

THE SWORDS OF ARAKKO

[Arakko].............[SWO]
[......].............[RDS]

VERMILLION
How hot is hate? How much more brightly does the blade of War burn? Enough to light the entirety of the Great Hall of Amenth.
Location: Stronghold [Amenth]

PURITY
The war never ends. The blade never grows dull. Drink deeply of demon blood, quenched in the rivers of Amenth. The White Sword endures.
Location: Ivory Spire [Amenth]

COLONY
Claimed by the void. Unformed. Unsummoned.
Location: Unknown [Otherworld]

ALLUVIUM
Captured along with its wielder.
Location: The Crooked Market [Otherworld]

MURAMASA
The Muramasa blade remains in the possession of Solem. A thirsty blade that will not long be apart from its twin.
Location: Unknown [Earth]

THE BLACK BONE OF AMDUAT
Captured along with its wielder.
Location: Sevelith [Otherworld]

SEDUCER
Everything is fine. Nothing's going to change. Mutants get married all the time. Kiss the blade, Doug. Learn to love it.
Location: Krakoa [Earth]

MERCY
The blade of the Omega mutant, Mercy, sits in judgement at the head of the Great Ring.
Location: Arakko

POGG UR-POGG
Sword for hire. Don't screw around. Adventures are imminent and these deals won't last long.
Location: Pod ur-Pogg [Amenth]

THE TWILIGHT BLADE
Abandoned on the field of battle. Stolen in the chaos of war. Who claimed the Twilight Blade, and what darkness grows in their heart?
Location: Unknown [Otherworld]

THE SWORDS OF KRAKOA

[Krakoa].............[SWO]
[......].............[RDS]

SOUL SWORD
The rightful blade of the ruler of Limbo remains in possession of the mutant captain, Magik. A worthy blade of a worthy champion.
Location: Krakoa [Earth]

MURAMASA
The Muramasa blade remains in the possession of Wolverine. A thirsty blade that will not long be apart from its twin.
Location: Krakoa [Earth]

SKYBREAKER
Even after its return, the wounds of the celebrated blade of the nation of Wakanda remain unhealed.
Location: Wakanda [Earth]

WARLOCK SWORD
Everything is fine. Nothing's going to change. Mutants get married all the time. We're going to be best friends forever.
Location: Krakoa [Earth]

LIGHT OF GALADOR
The alien blade of Cable will continue to power the S.W.O.R.D. station above Earth until a replacement igniter can be found/constructed.
Location: S.W.O.R.D. [Earth]

SWORD OF MIGHT
The blade of Brian Braddock, prince of Avalon, defender of the realm, remains ever ready to defend the Monarch's throne.
Location: Avalon [Otherworld]

STARLIGHT SWORD
The celebrated ceremonial blade of a member of the Captain Britain Corps. The remains of the shattered blade of Betsy Braddock rest in the Starlight Citadel. The summoning mosaic of the Otherworldly knight of Saturnyne.
Location: The Starlight Citadel [Otherworld]

SCARAB BLADE
Shattered / broken. The pieces buried on the scarred battlefield beneath the home of Saturnyne.
Location: The Starlight Citadel [Otherworld]

GRASSCUTTER / GODKILLER
The twin blades of the mutant captain, Gorgon, were carried home to Krakoa where they wait for their master to claim them. After a corrupted resurrection, will he reclaim them, or reject them?
Location: Krakoa [Earth]

THE CAPTAIN BRITAIN CORPS (REFORMED)

Following the reformation of the remnants of the Starlight Sword and the completion of Saturnyne's rite, the Captain Britain Corps found itself reformed and restored to its former glory once again in the hands of a brave Braddock.

As the knight of the Starlight Citadel, Captain Britain and the Omniversal Majestrix are forever bound. However, the re-establishment of the Corps seems to have come with a sacrifice: the brave Captain who took it in hand with enough power to restore her order has been shattered in Saturnyne's games - and is still missing.

UNACCOUNTED FOR:

Captain Britain, Betsy Braddock - Seat 616*
(Captain Britain PRIME)

PRESENT AND ACCOUNTED FOR:

Captain Britain (Beth Braddock) - Seat 6
Justicar Druidica - Seat 14
Captain Britain (Elizander Braddock) - Seat 15
Captain Amphibian - Seat 22
Alpha Briton - Seat 33
Sister Britain - Seat 65
Captain Krakoica - Seat 78
The Green Woman - Seat 99
Capitaine Angland - Seat 305
Captain Albion - Seat 523
Captain Britain (Liz Braddock) - Seat 812
Captain UK - Seat 839
Captain Bretland - Seat 904
Captain Granbretan - Seat 1812
Captain Plumdragon - Seat 2112
High Priestess Celtia - Seat 2113
Crusader X - Seat 2122
Centurion Britannia - Seat 4100
Captain Baboon - Seat 8101
The Violet Swan - Seat 8311
Elspeth Braddock - Seat 13059
Britannica Rex - Seat 99476

[SECTION 1 of 564430: continued on next page]

I see that look in your eye...and I know exactly what it means.
You have a question for me, Ryl?
Mistress, I know you see all, know all, and have complete dominion over this realm...
And, yes, you had the cards--*with their prophetic power added to your own*--but the... assuredness and confidence with which you navigated all this...chaos...
Did you know everything ahead of time?
Did you see it all?
Not all. This is, after all, the Multiverse...
...and one must accept a certain amount of randomness when ruling Otherworld.
But there were some signs impossible not to read.

"Husband and wife would be pitted against each other and be reunited at no small cost.
"As would mother and child.
"The tenth sword would descend from heaven, only to return at the dawn of a new age.
"The ninth sword would be returned to its rightful home--*deep in the rumbling earth*--while the goddess turns her eyes to the stars.
"I saw that the mutant council would break. The first two cracks in that firmament.
"Of course, these are all things that concern me little...*if at all.*

"What matters most are matters of this court.
"Avalon soon controlling the sole ingress and egress to Earth. A necessary distraction for its mutant king--*the coming and going of actors both fair and foul...*
"And of my own fair and foul kingdoms, I have seen fit to make Blightspoke useful to me.
"Summoners, to tame the things that refuse to die there.
"Vescora, to mine the untold riches hidden in the strata of dead universes...
"The bartering of which will dominate the wild plans and bent mind of he who runs the Crooked Market.
"And the relentless appetite of the undying lands of Sevelith, will be sated by Death himself."

As for the other kingdoms, well...
...I have other means of controlling them.
Yes, Mistress... this one I know well.
The sword of Saturnyne. Reforged and brilliant with the light of infinite stars.
And now that I think about it...I understand. This was the greater purpose of all your machinations.
The return of the Captain Britain Corps as your loyal knights.
Congratulations, Milady. You have won and deserve to have all that you desire.

She is *Opal Luna Saturnyne.*
Omniversal Majestrix.
The rightful ruler of Otherworld.
The white light of both fair and foul kingdoms and the eternal seat of the Starlight Citadel.
Who in her dominion had won everything she had ever *needed...*
...but not the one thing she truly *wanted.*
Long may she reign.

[END]

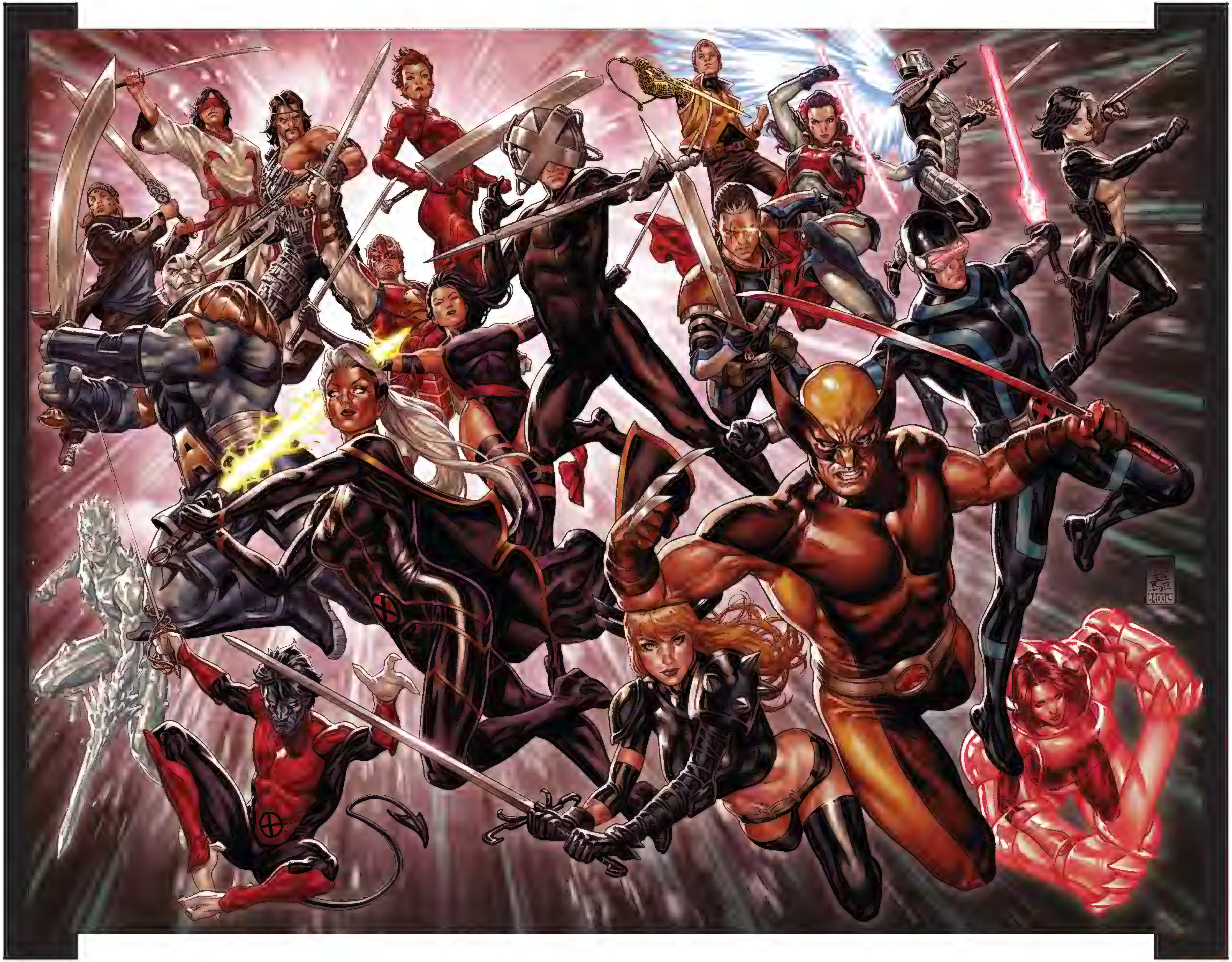
X OF SWORDS
X-MEN
X

[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

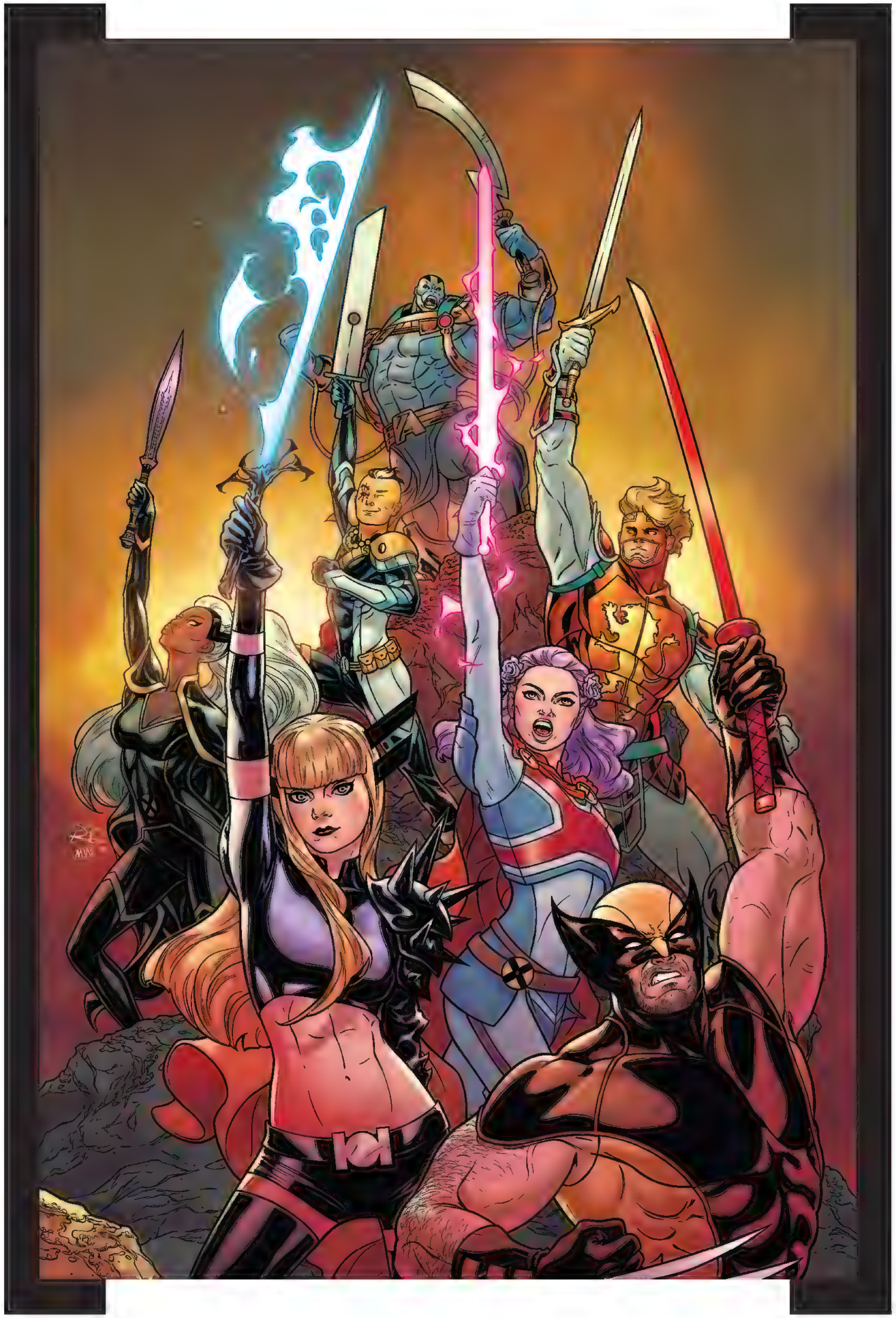
[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[00_mutants_of_X]
[00_the_world__X]

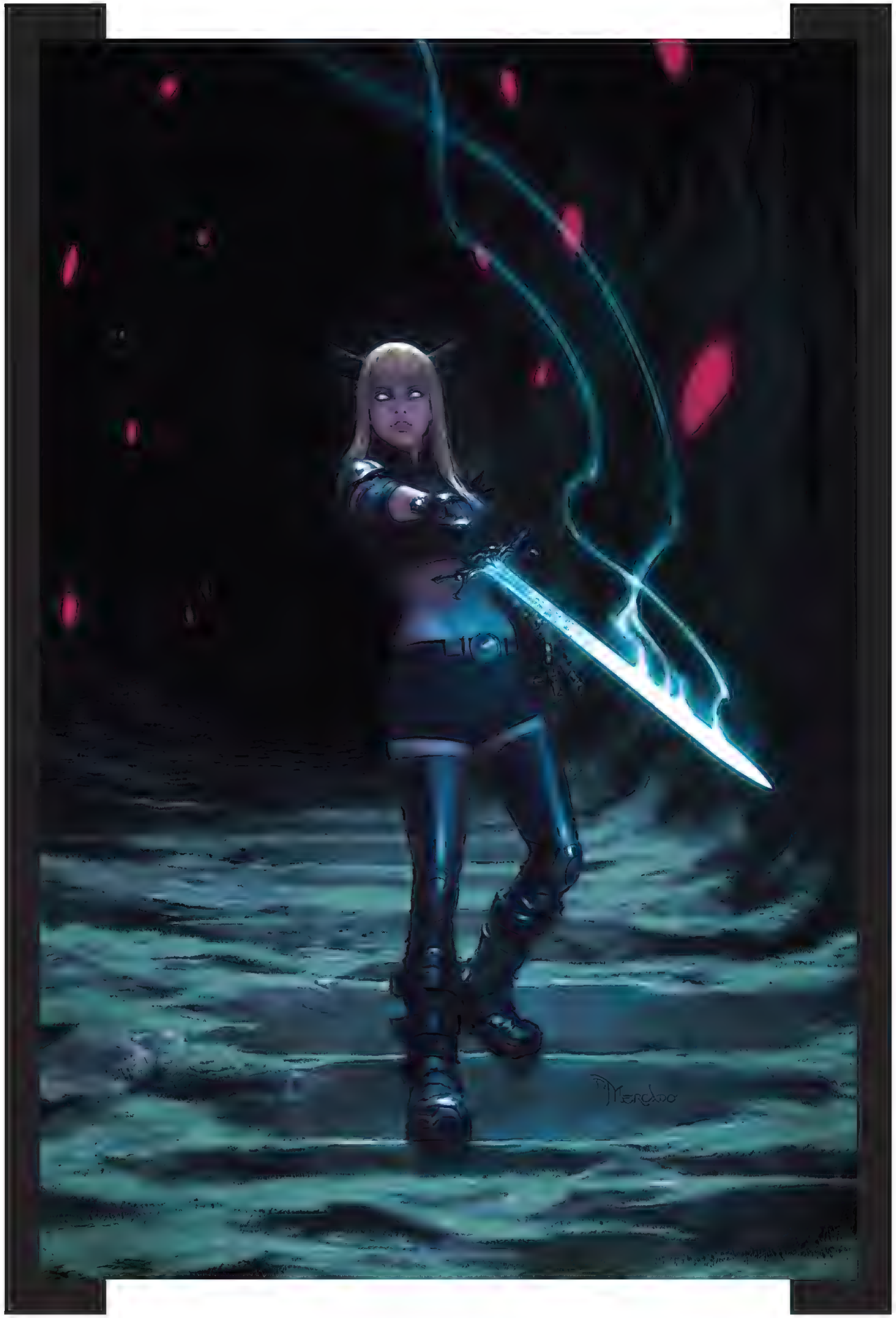
[00_Unite______]



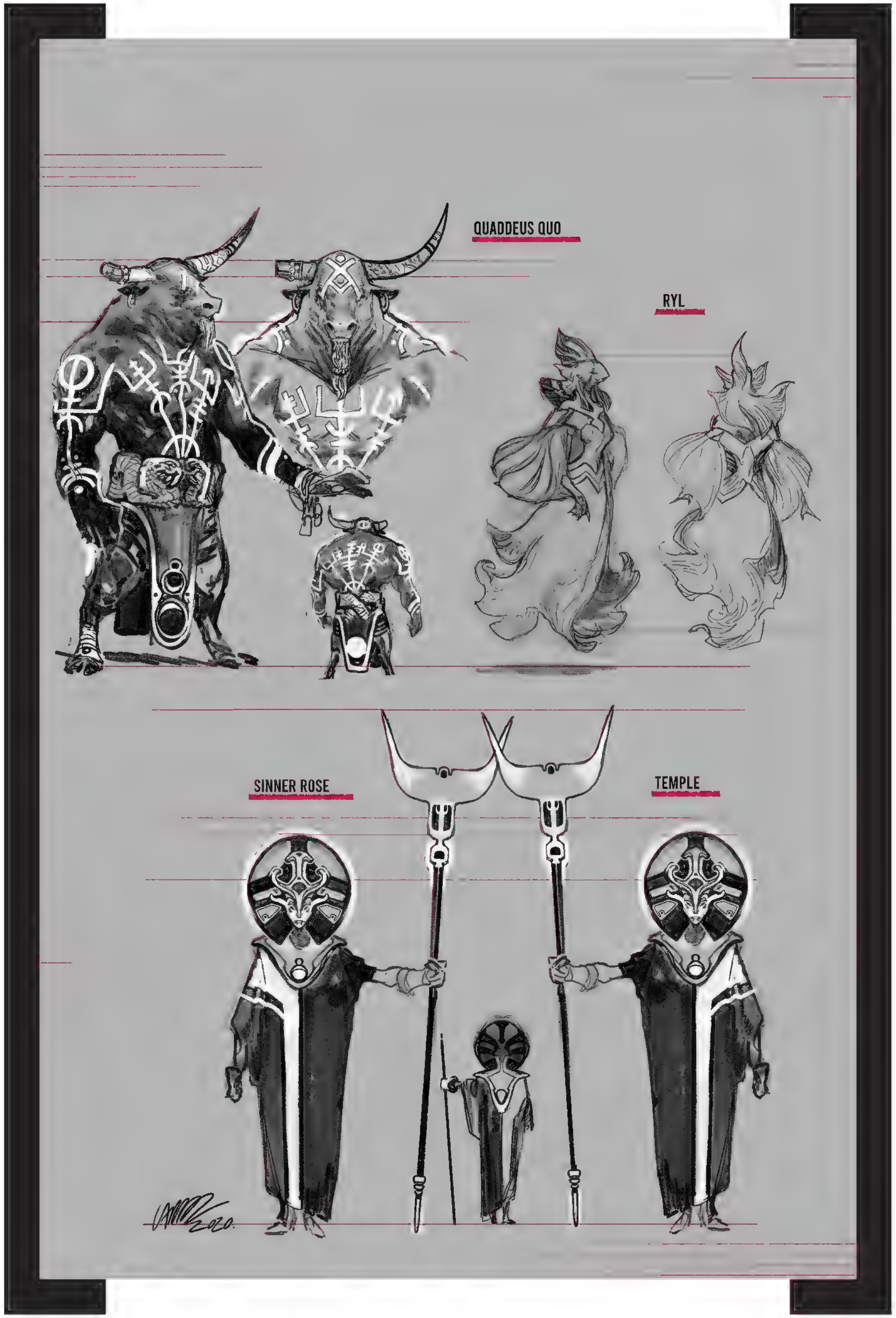
X OF SWORDS: CREATION #1 WRAPAROUND VARIANT
by Mark Brooks



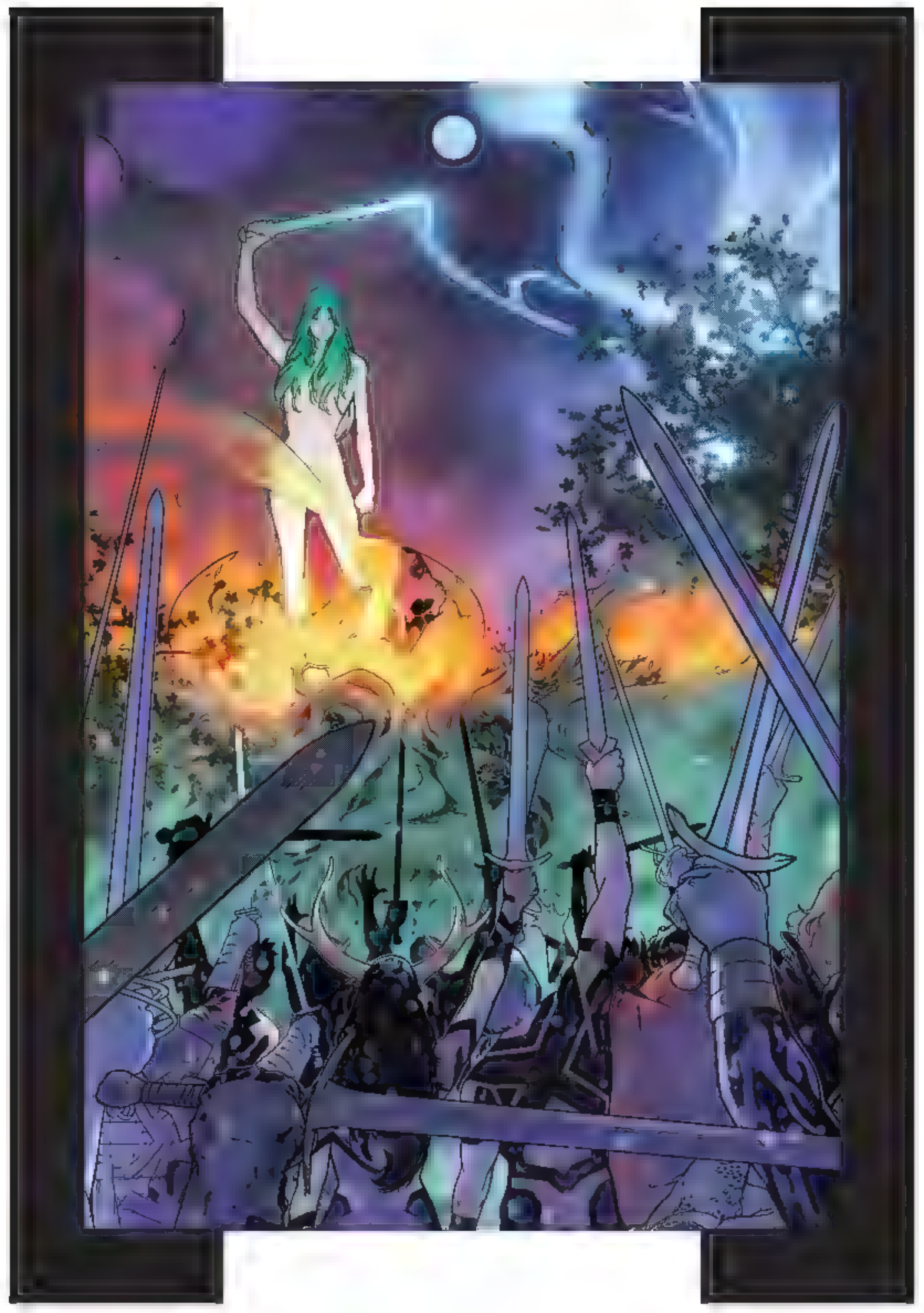
X OF SWORDS: CREATION #1 VARIANT
by Russell Dauterman
& Matthew Wilson



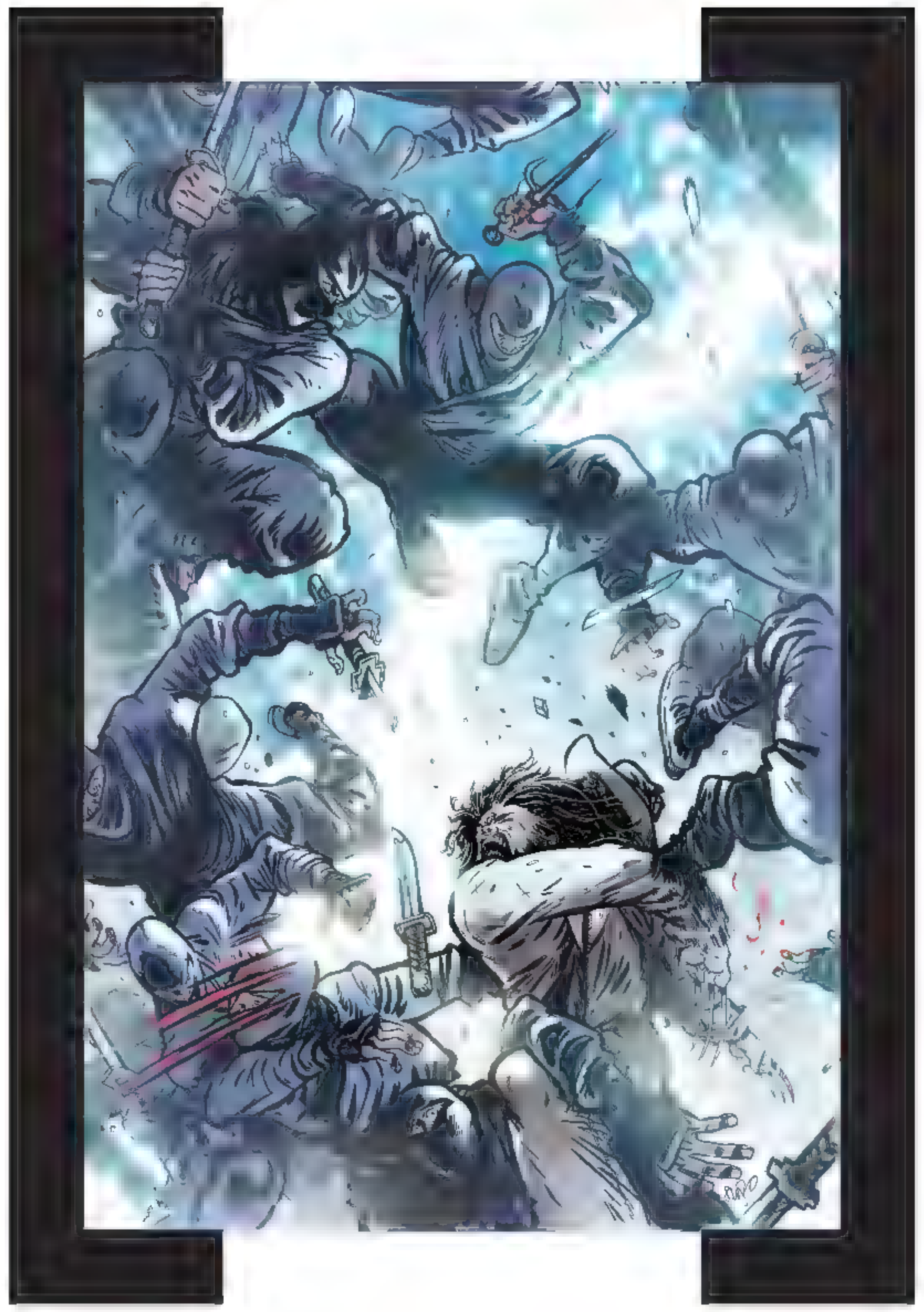
X OF SWORDS: CREATION #1 VARIANT
by Miguel Mercado


QUADDEUS QUO
RYL
SINNER ROSE
TEMPLE

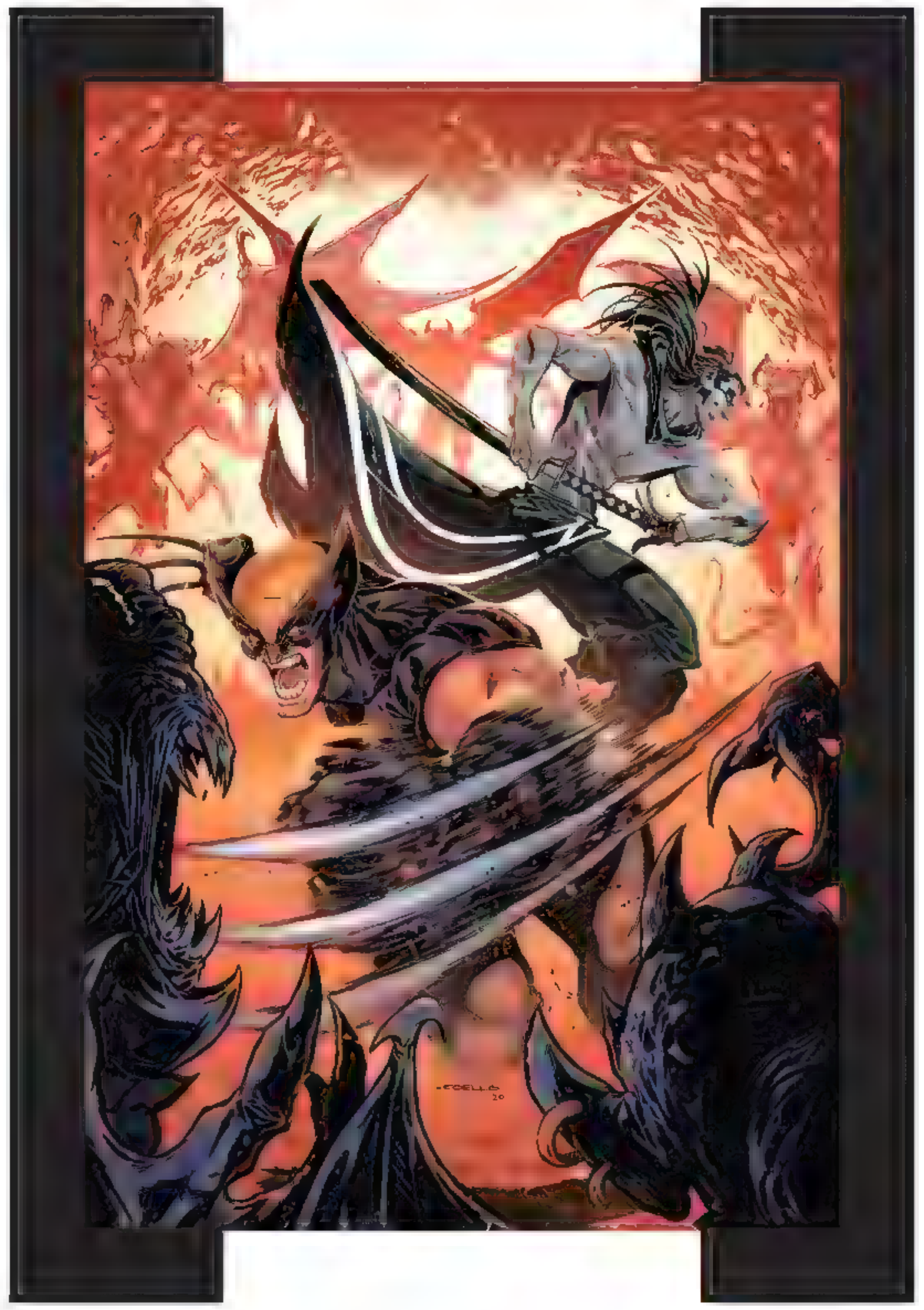
X OF SWORDS: CREATION #1 DESIGN VARIANT
by Pepe Larraz



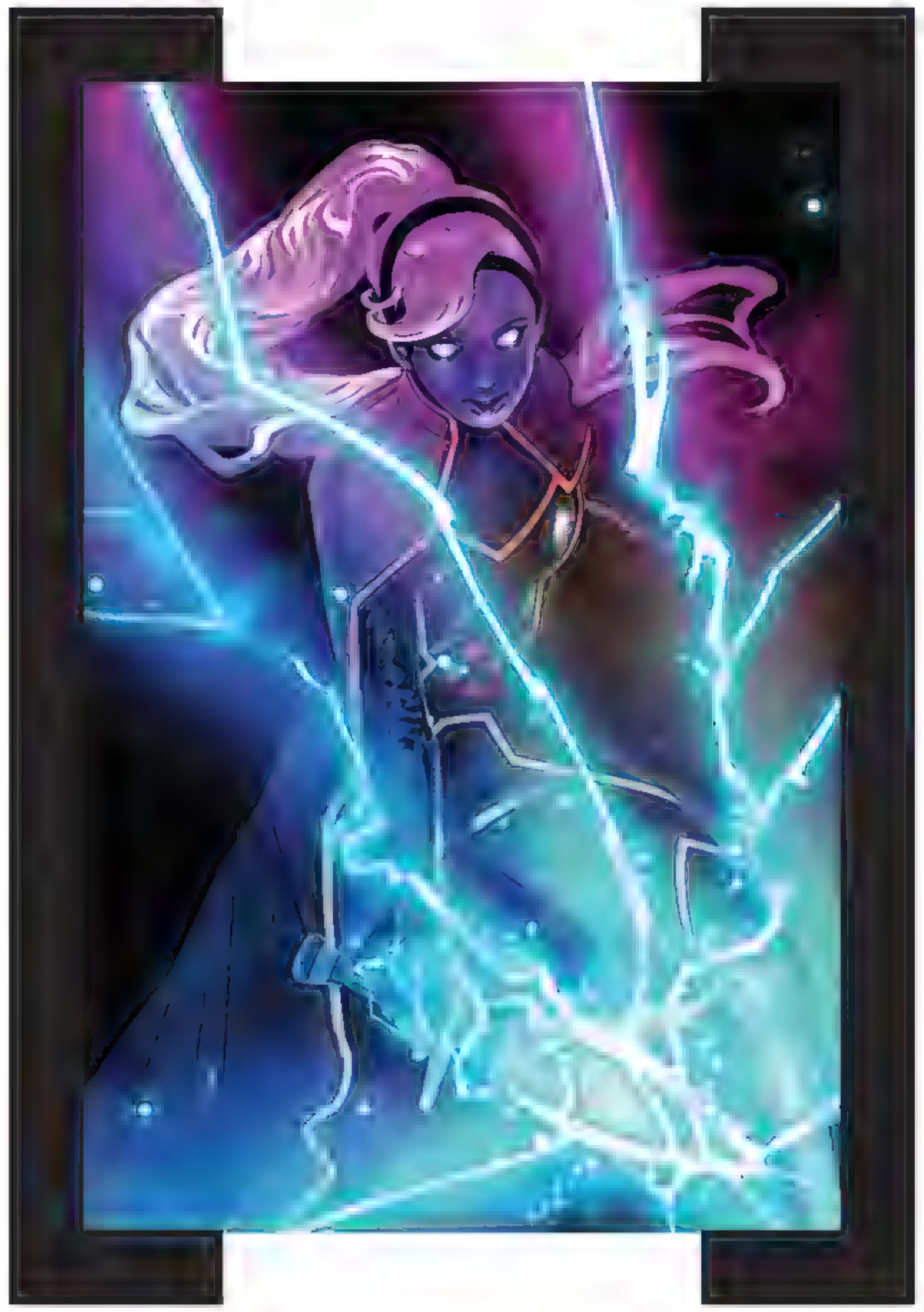
X-FACTOR #4 VARIANT
by R.B. Silva
& Jesus Aburtov



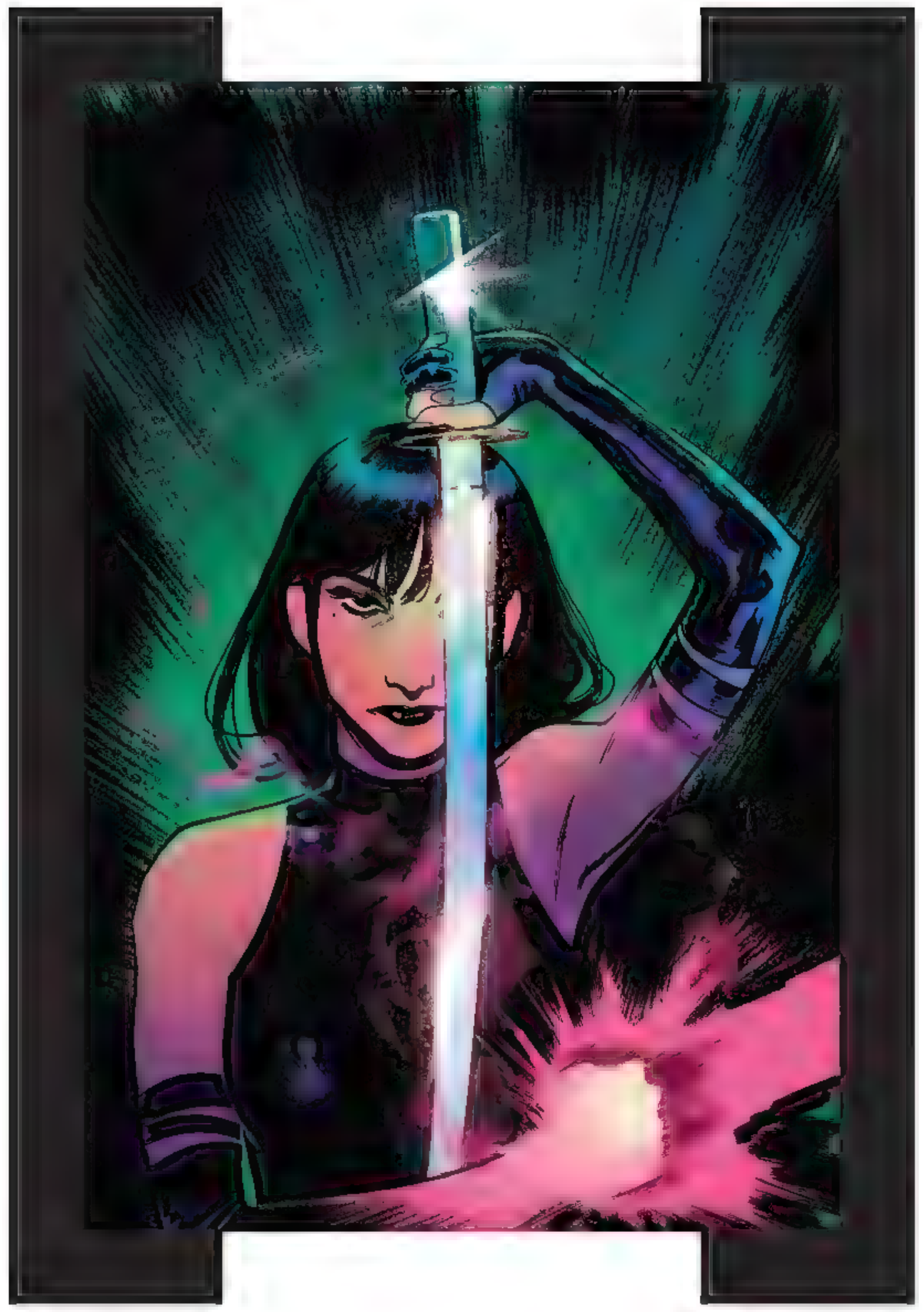
WOLVERINE #6 VARIANT
by Daniel Warren Johnson



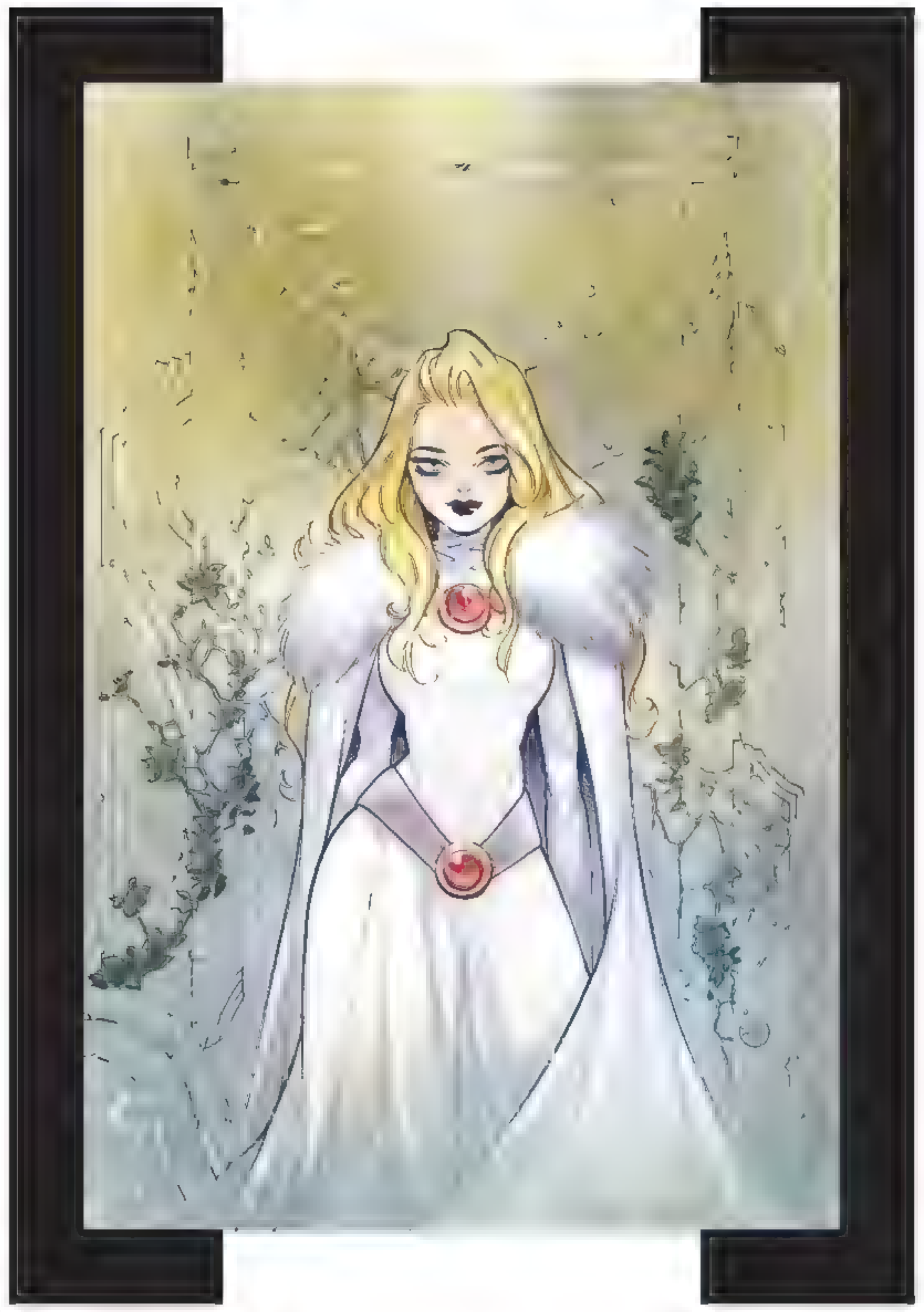
X-FORCE #13 VARIANT
by Iban Coello
& Jay David Ramos



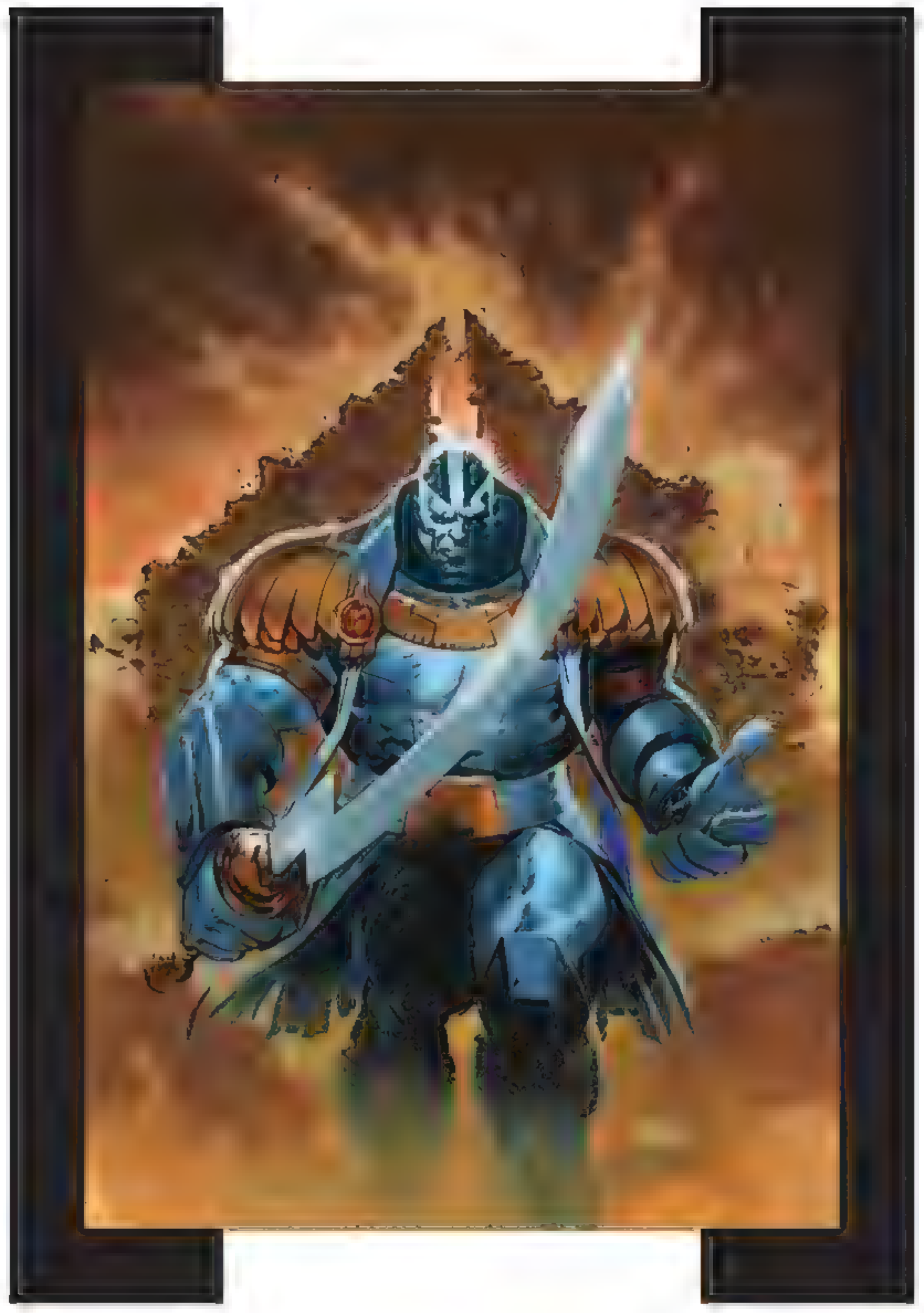
MARAUDERS #13 VARIANT
by Stephanie Hans



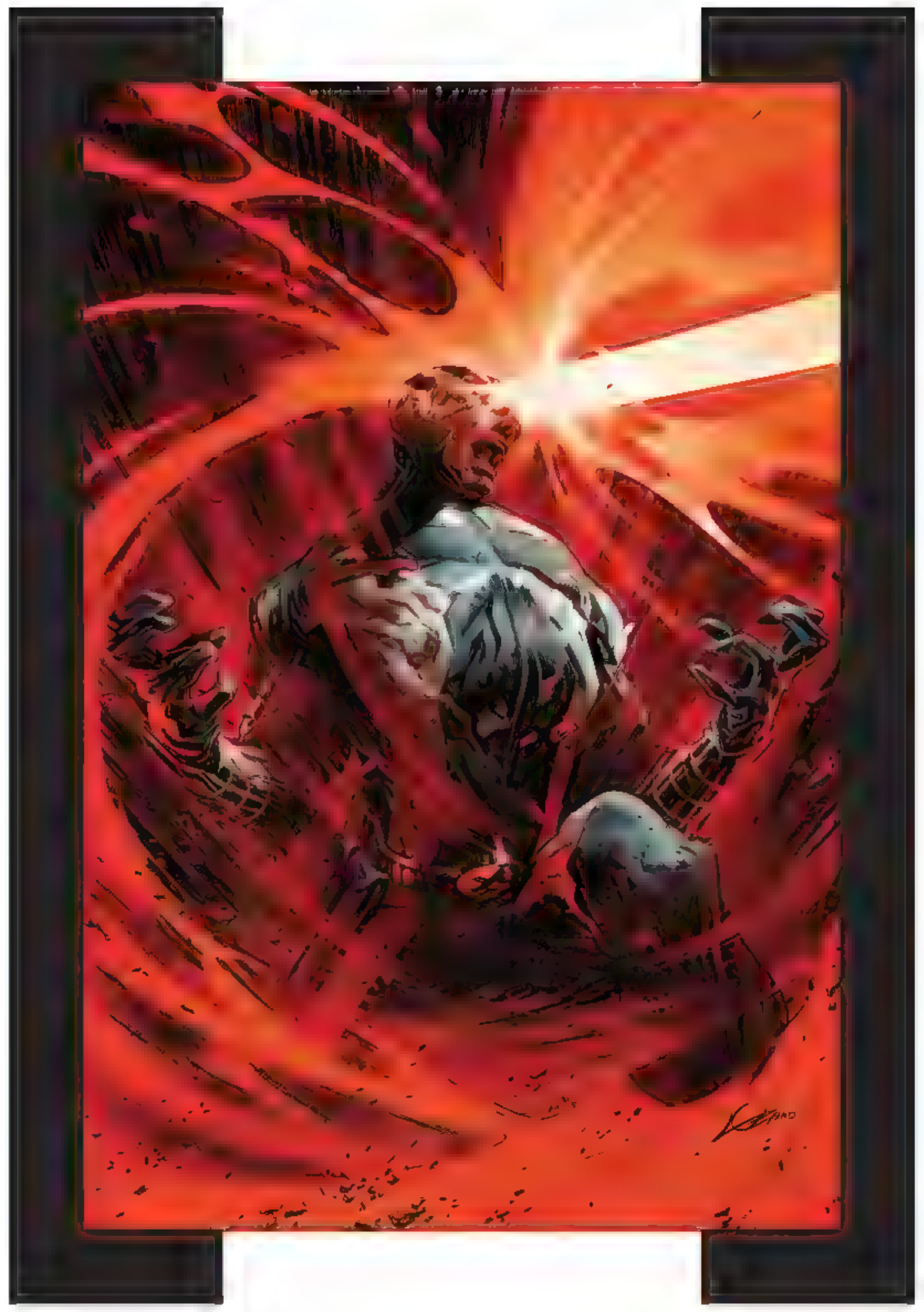
HELLIONS # 5 VARIANT
by Sara Pichelli
& Tamra Bonvillain



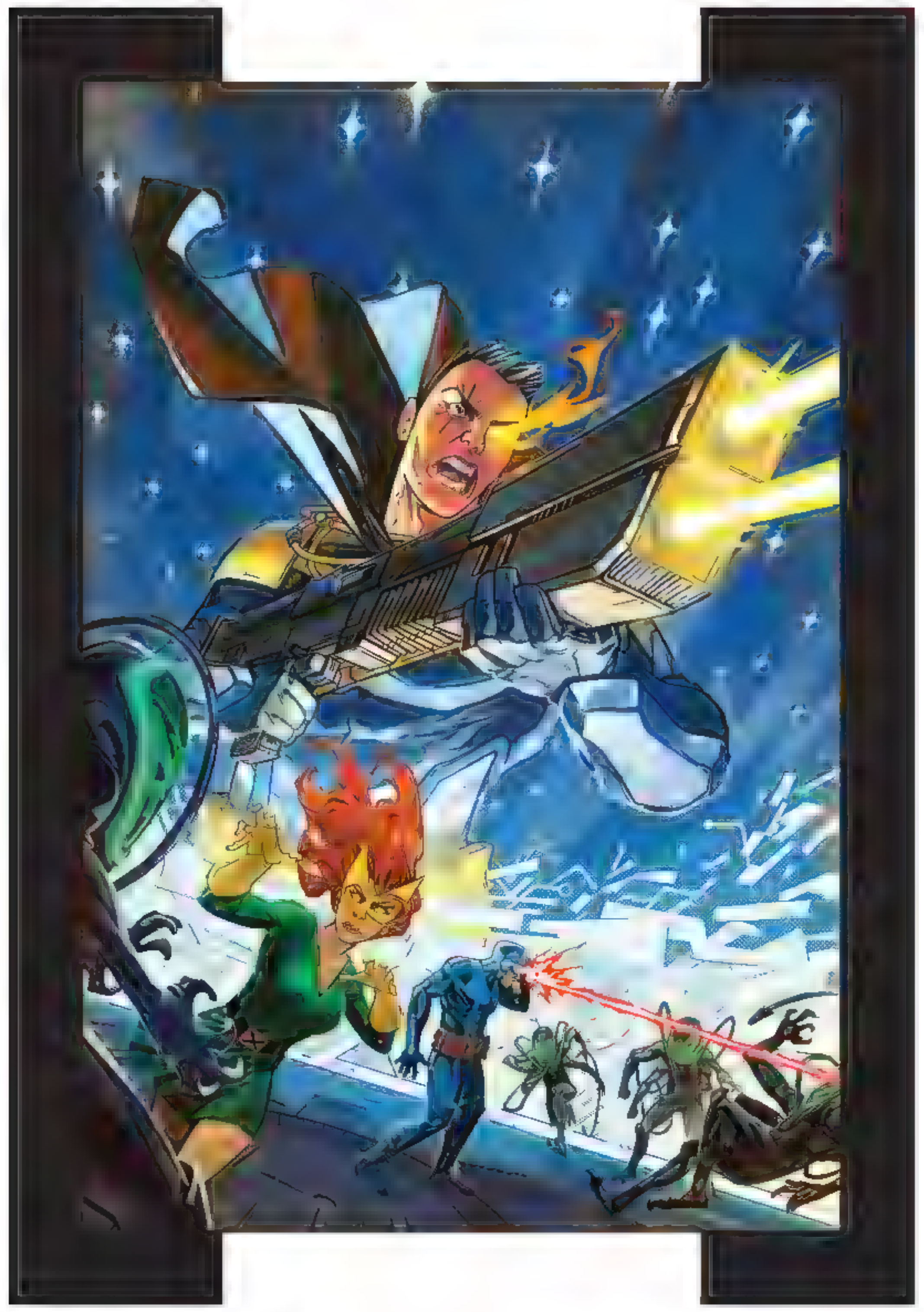
NEW MUTANTS #13 VARIANT
by Peach Momoko



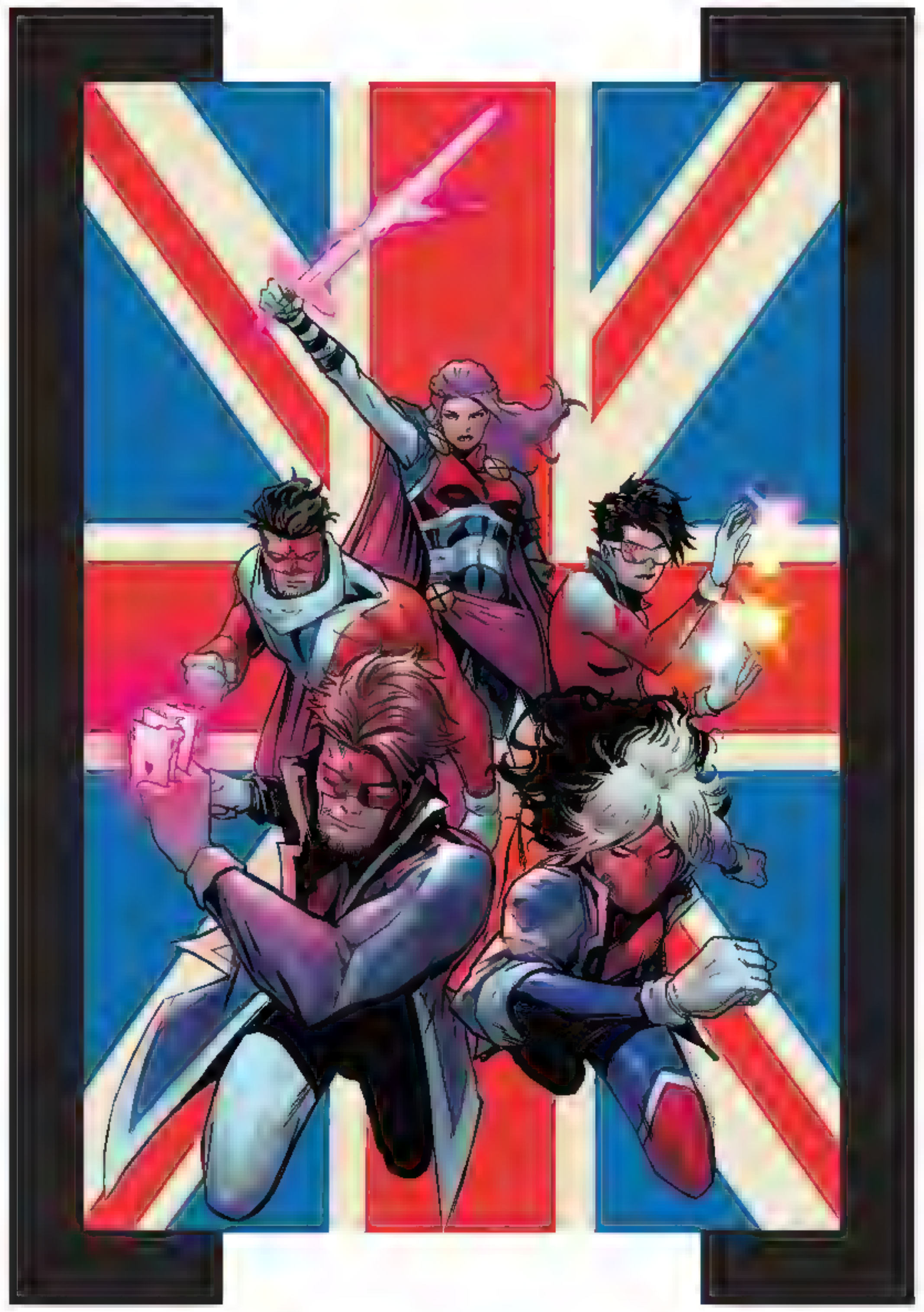
X-MEN #13 VARIANT
by Mahmud Asrar



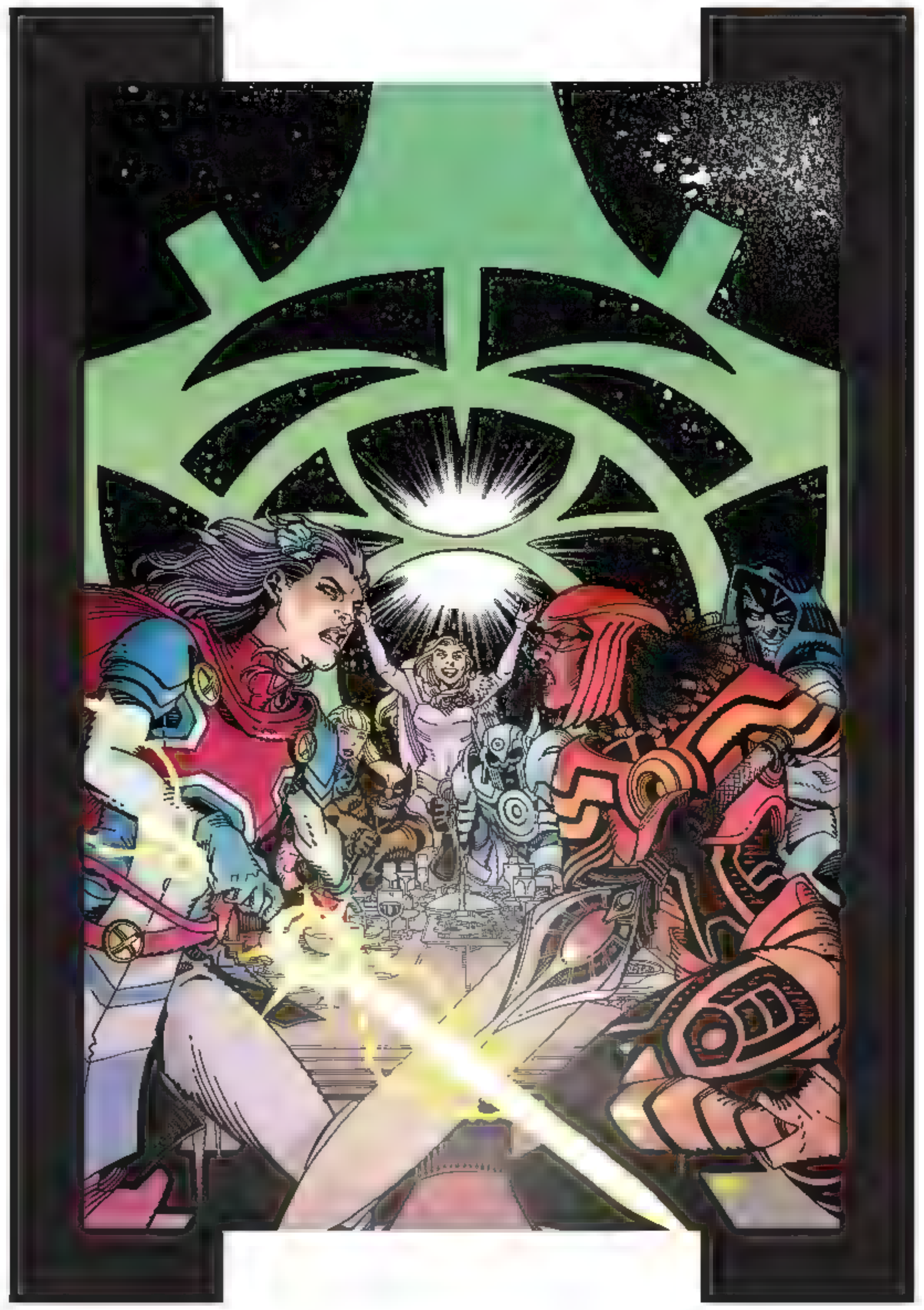
X-MEN #14 VARIANT
by Alexander Lozano



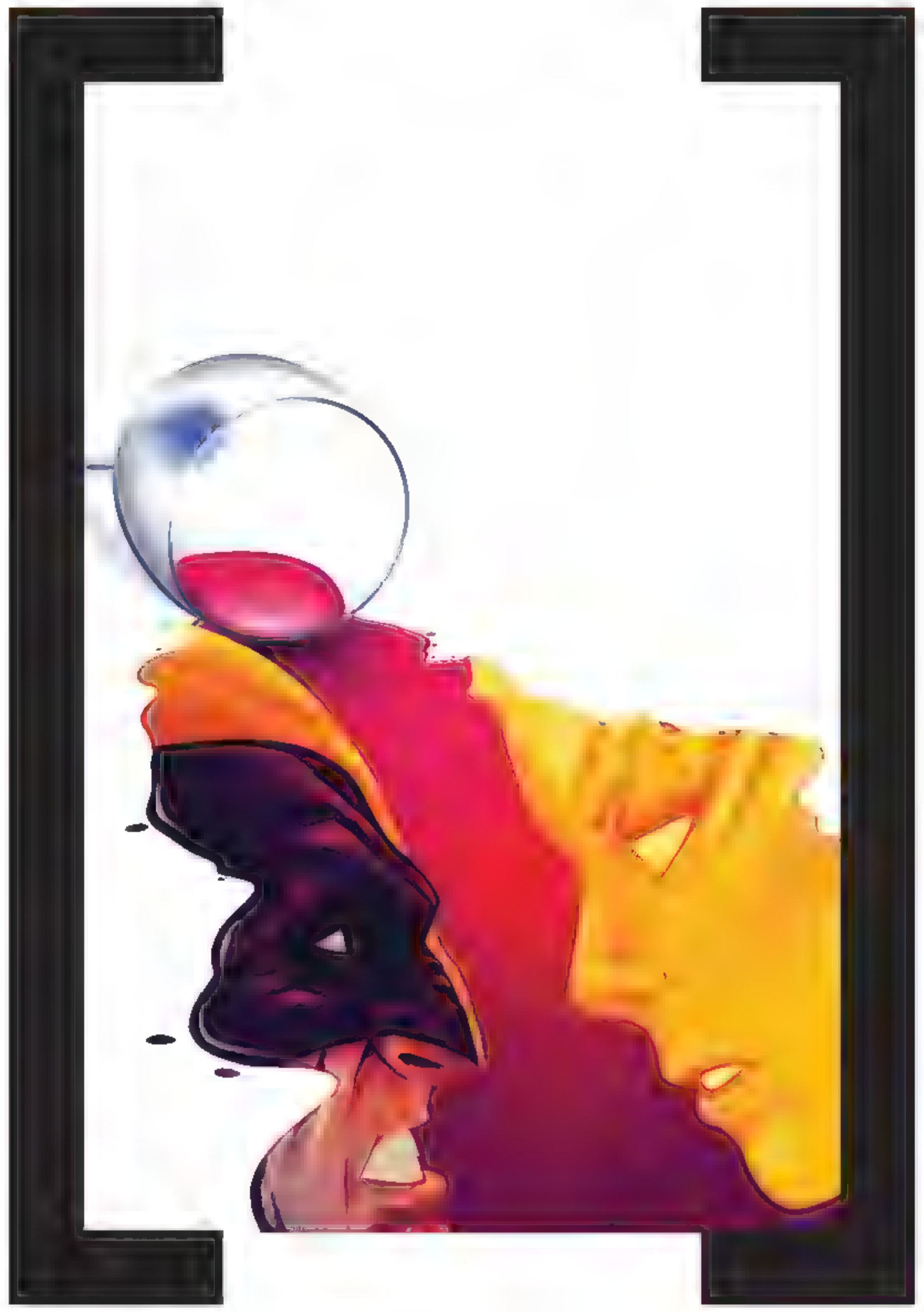
CABLE #5 VARIANT
by Ivan Shavrin



EXCALIBUR #13 VARIANT
by Lee Garbett
& Frank D'Armata



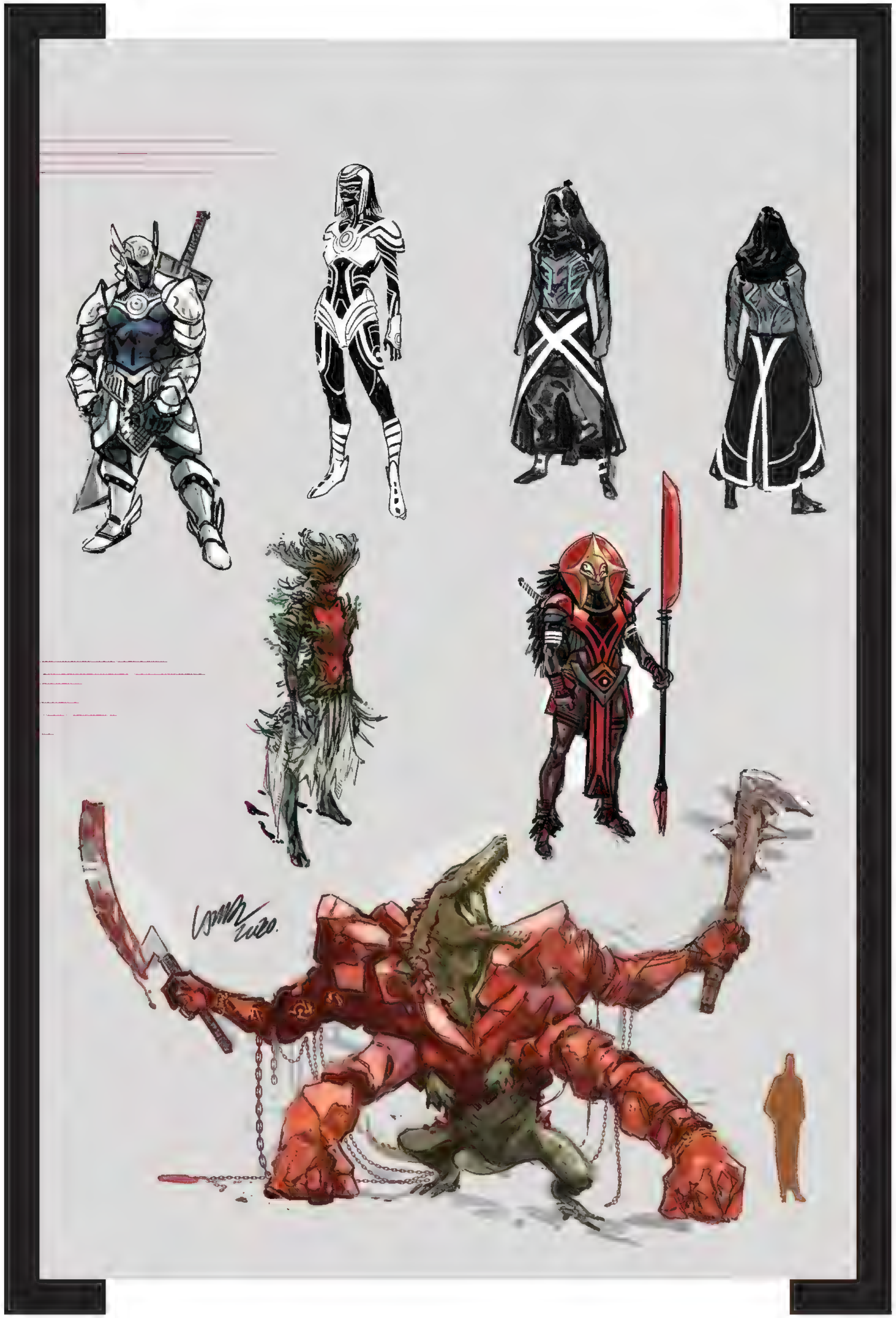
MARAUDERS #14 VARIANT
by Cully Hamner



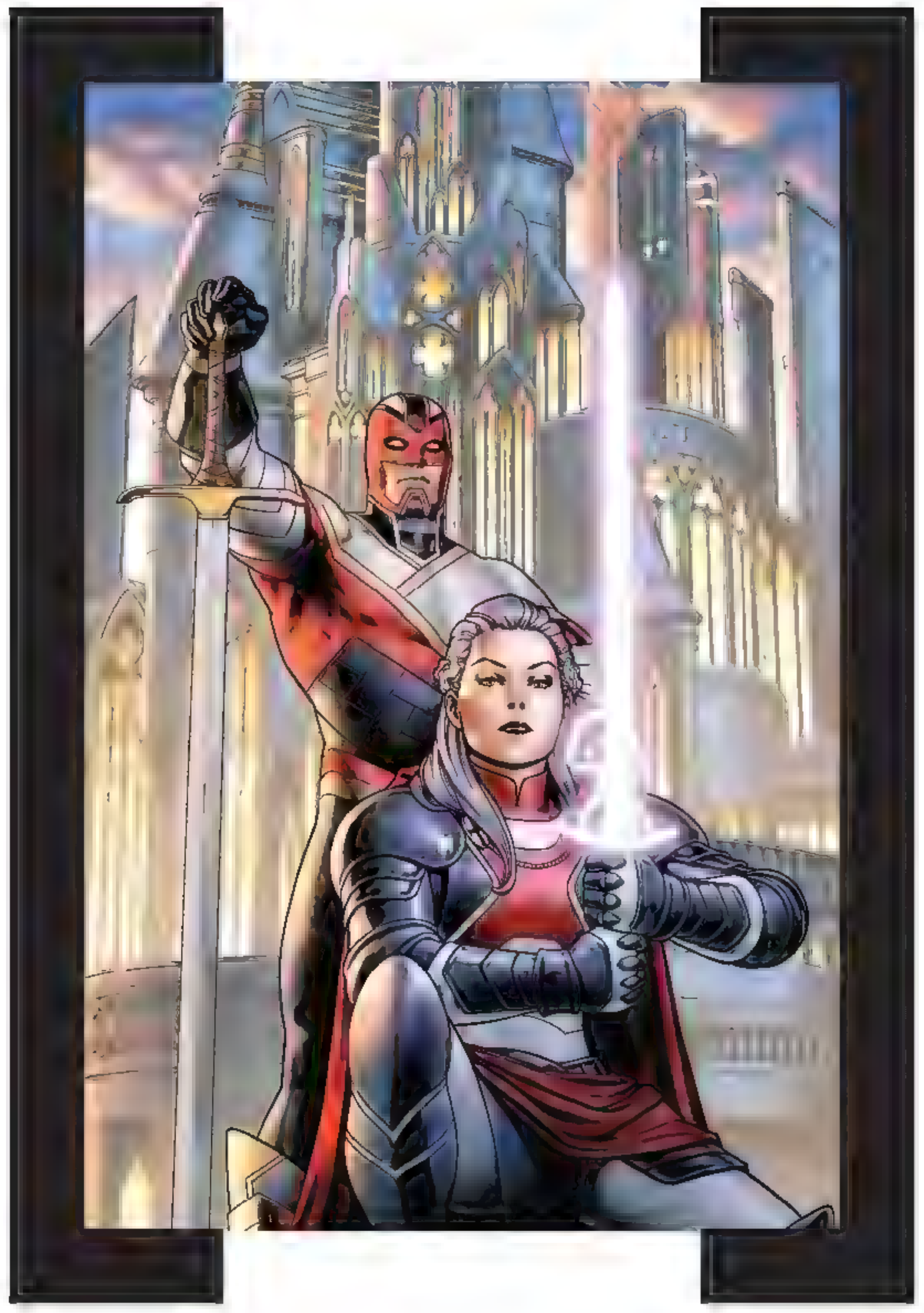
MARAUDERS #15 VARIANT
by Doaly

X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 VARIANT
by Humberto Ramos
& Edgar Delgado

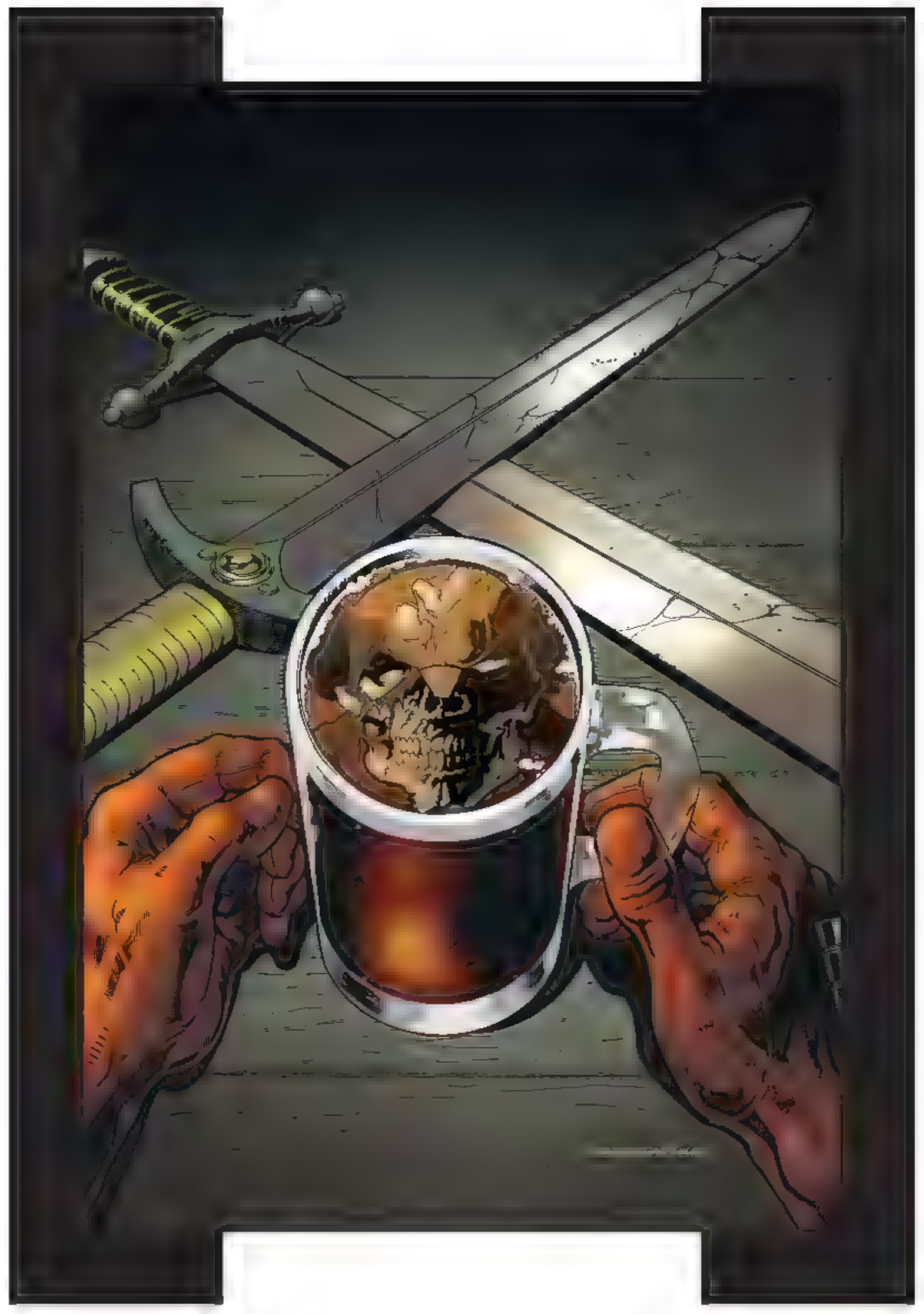
X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 VARIANT
by Coax



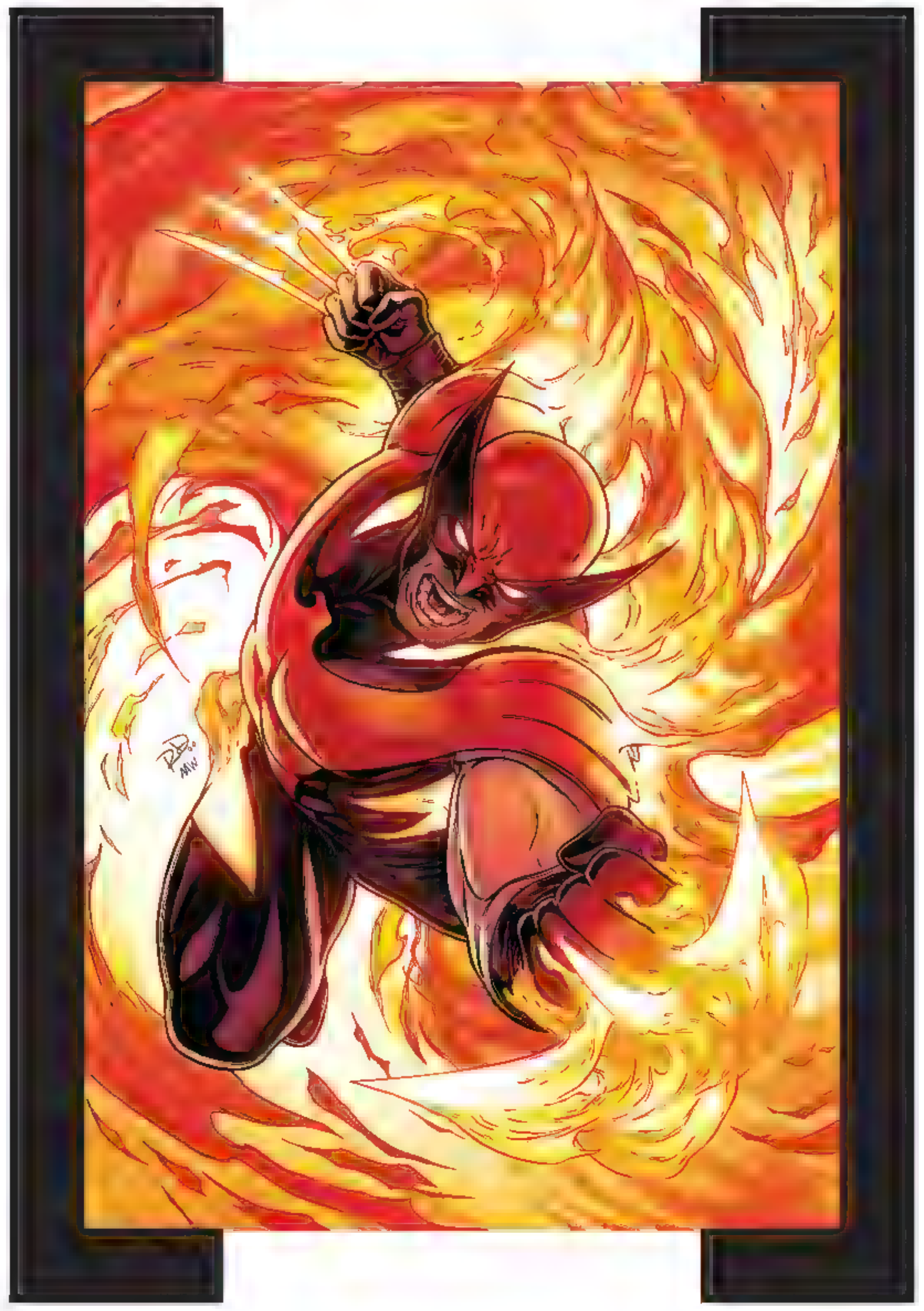
X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 DESIGN VARIANT
by Pepe Larraz



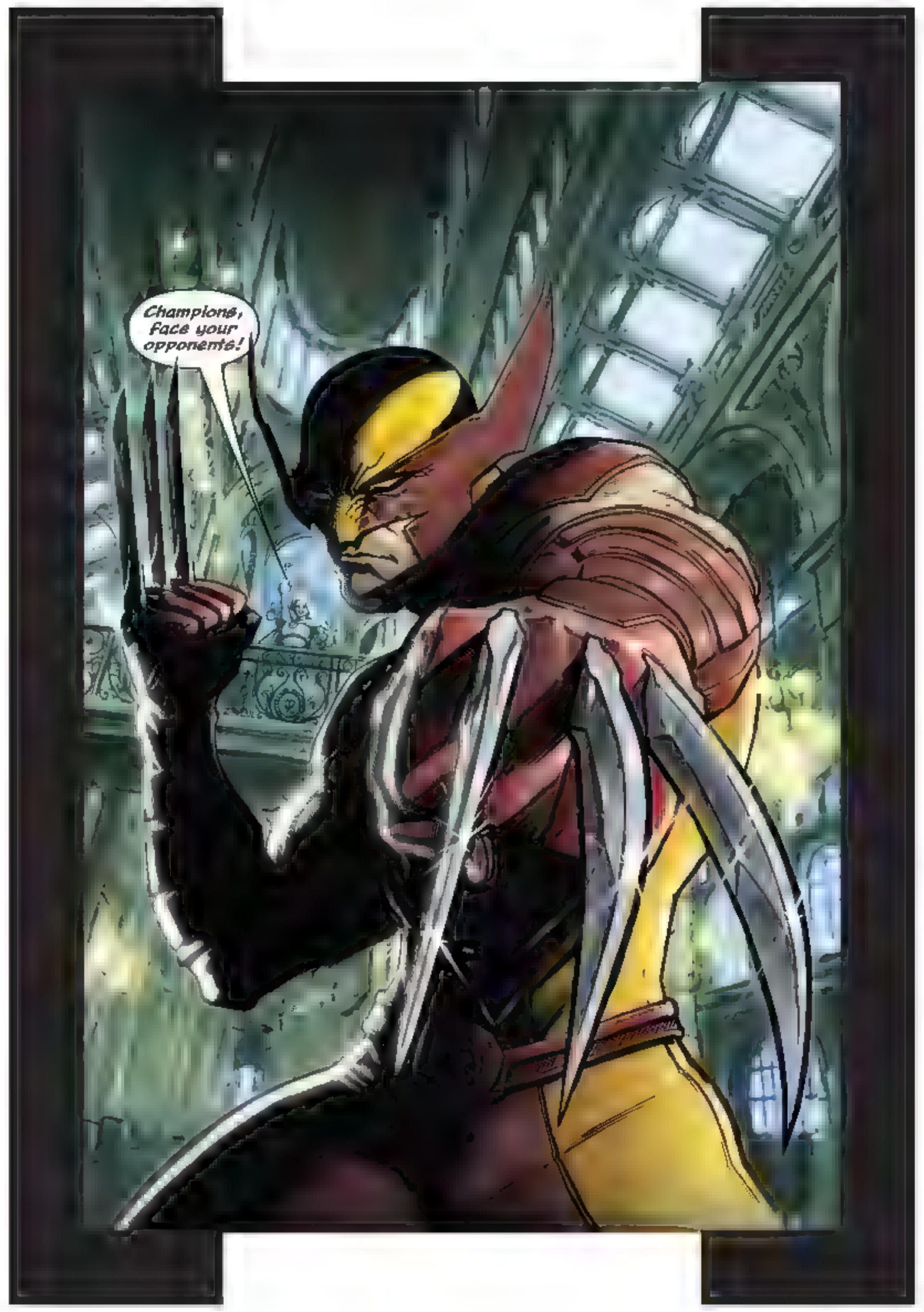
EXCALIBUR #14 VARIANT
by Jesús Saiz



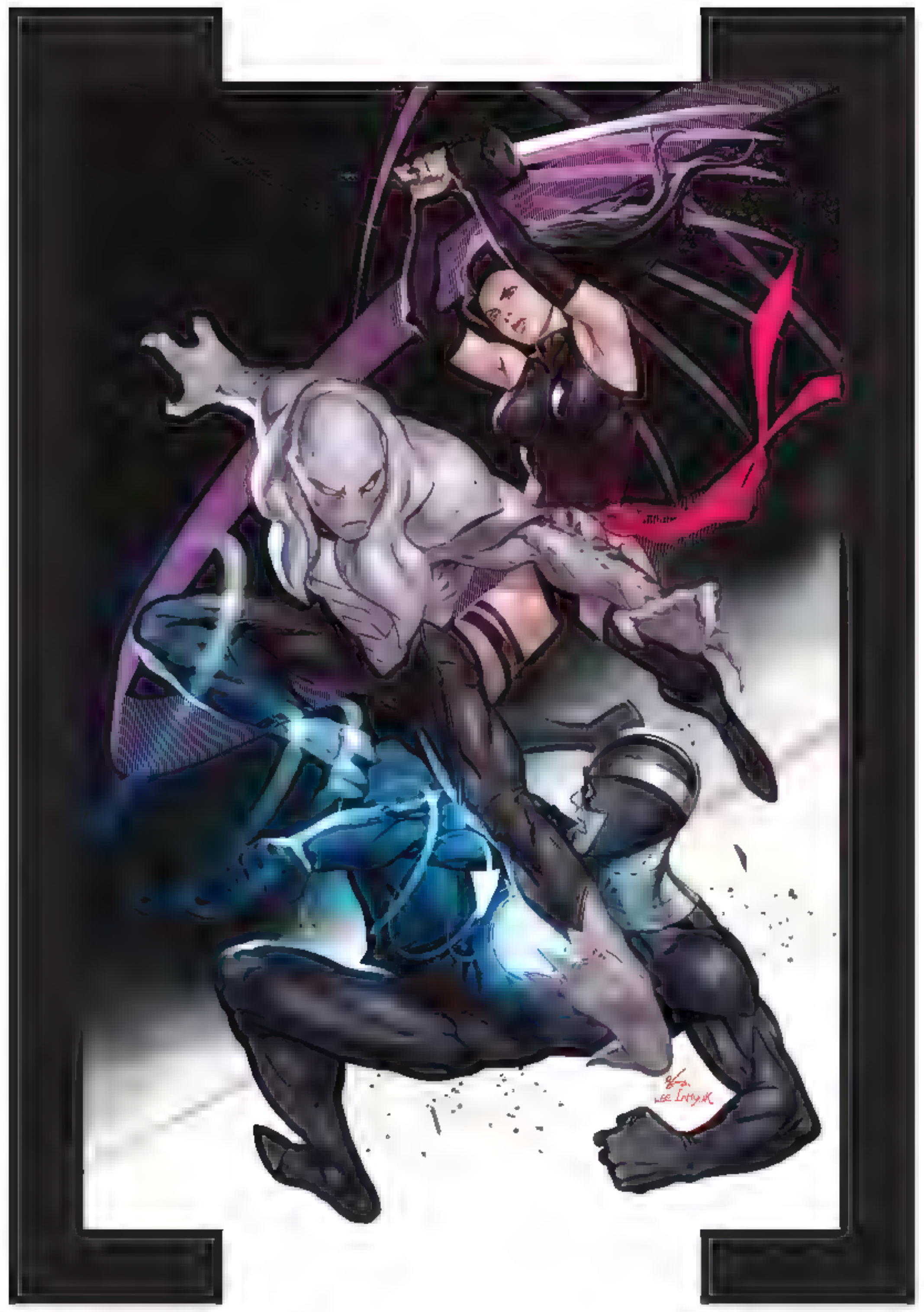
WOLVERINE #7 VARIANT
by Kevin Nowlan



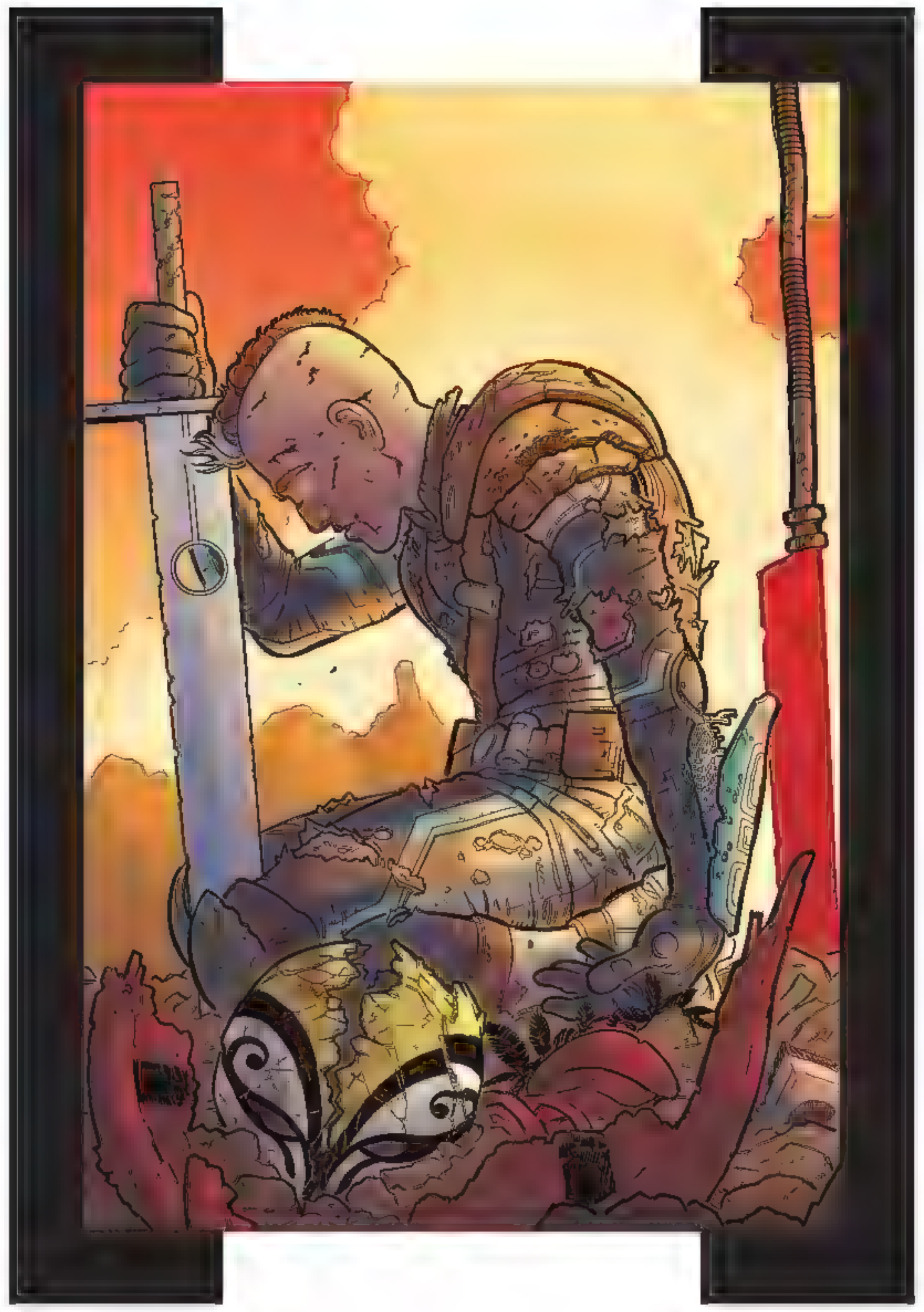
WOLVERINE #7 PHOENIX VARIANT
by Russell Dauterman
& Matthew Wilson


Champions, face your opponents!

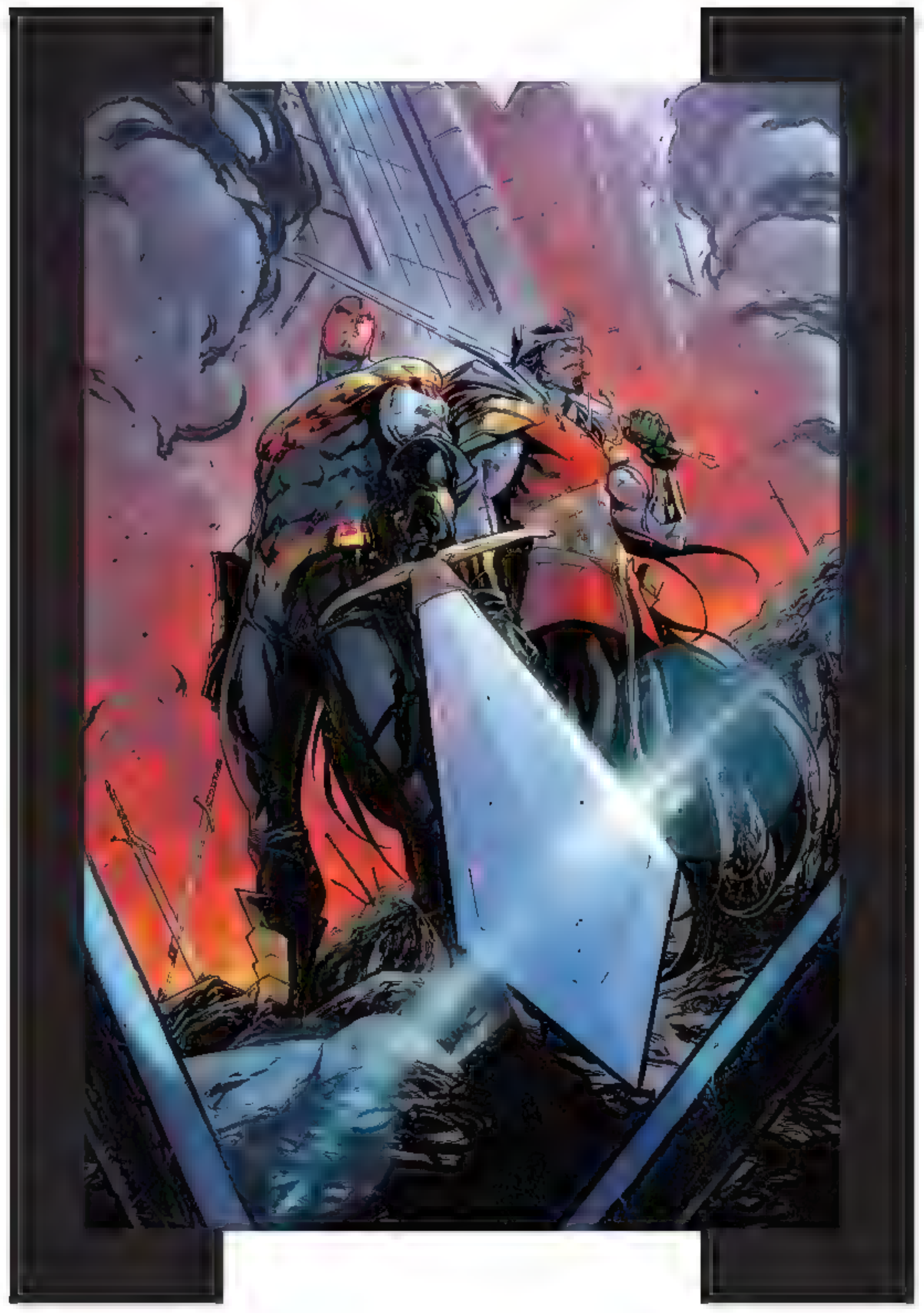
X-FORCE #14 VARIANT
by Juan Ferreyra



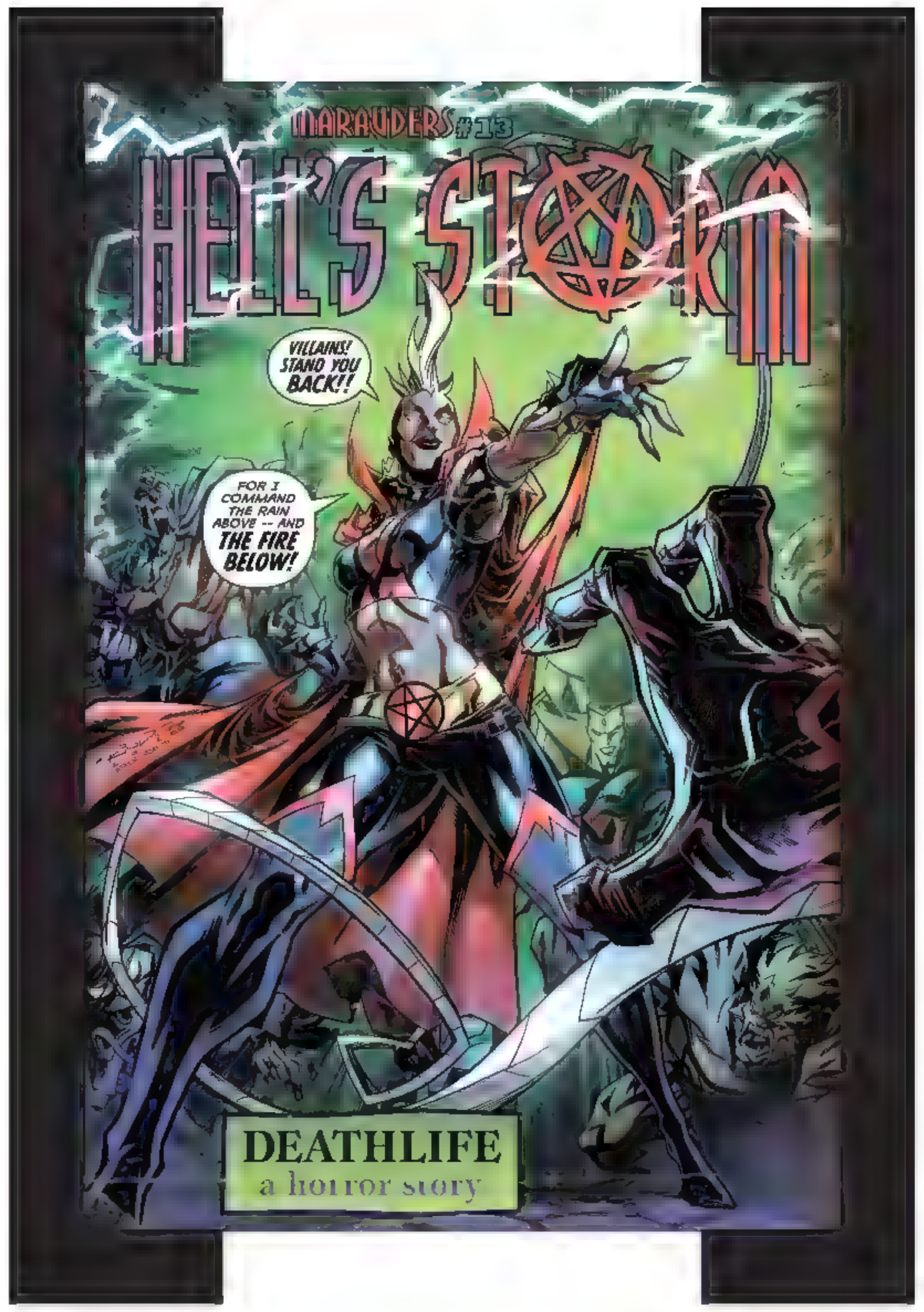
HELLIONS #5 VARIANT
by InHyuk Lee



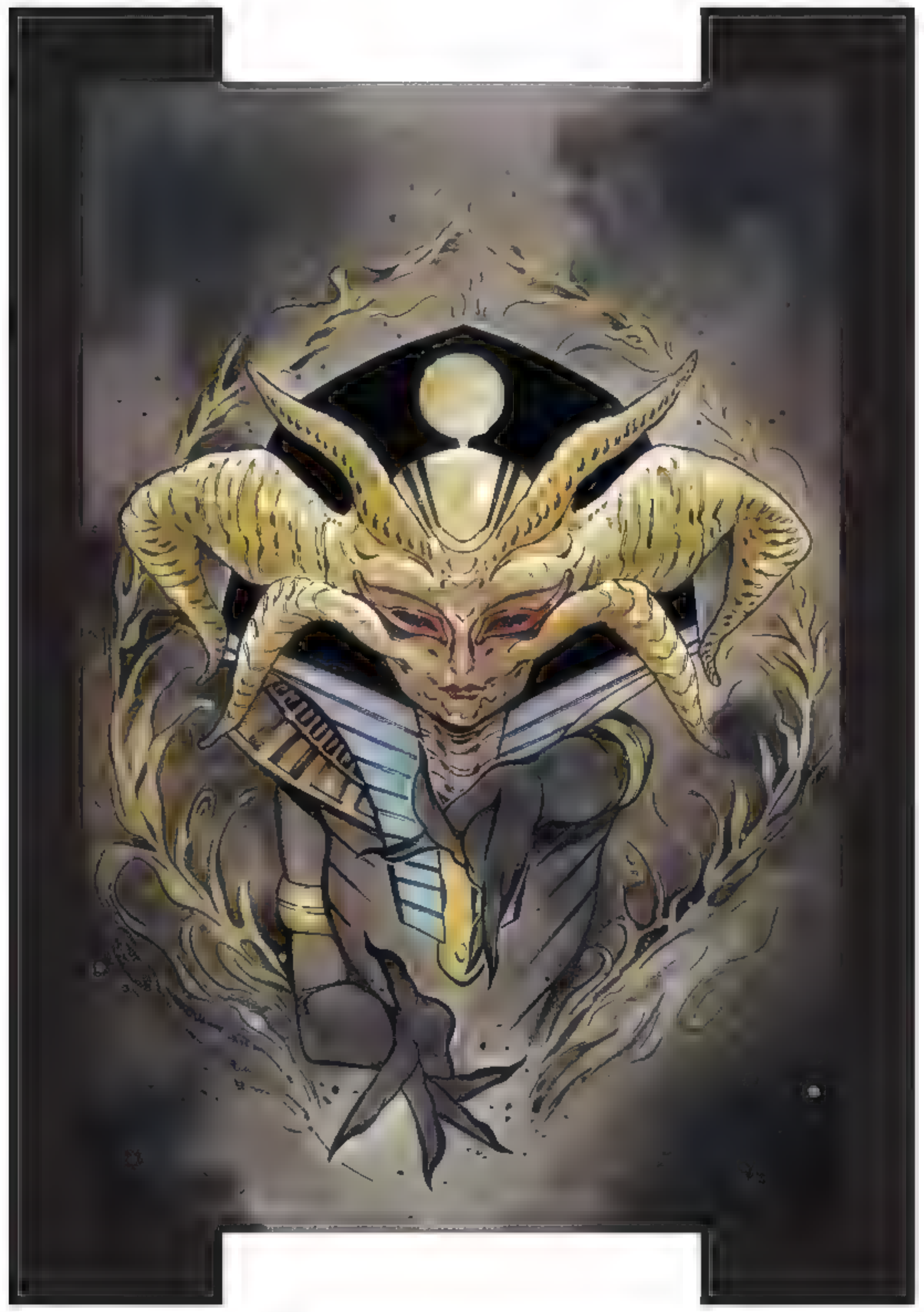
CABLE #6 VARIANT
by Steve Skroce
& Chris O'Halloran



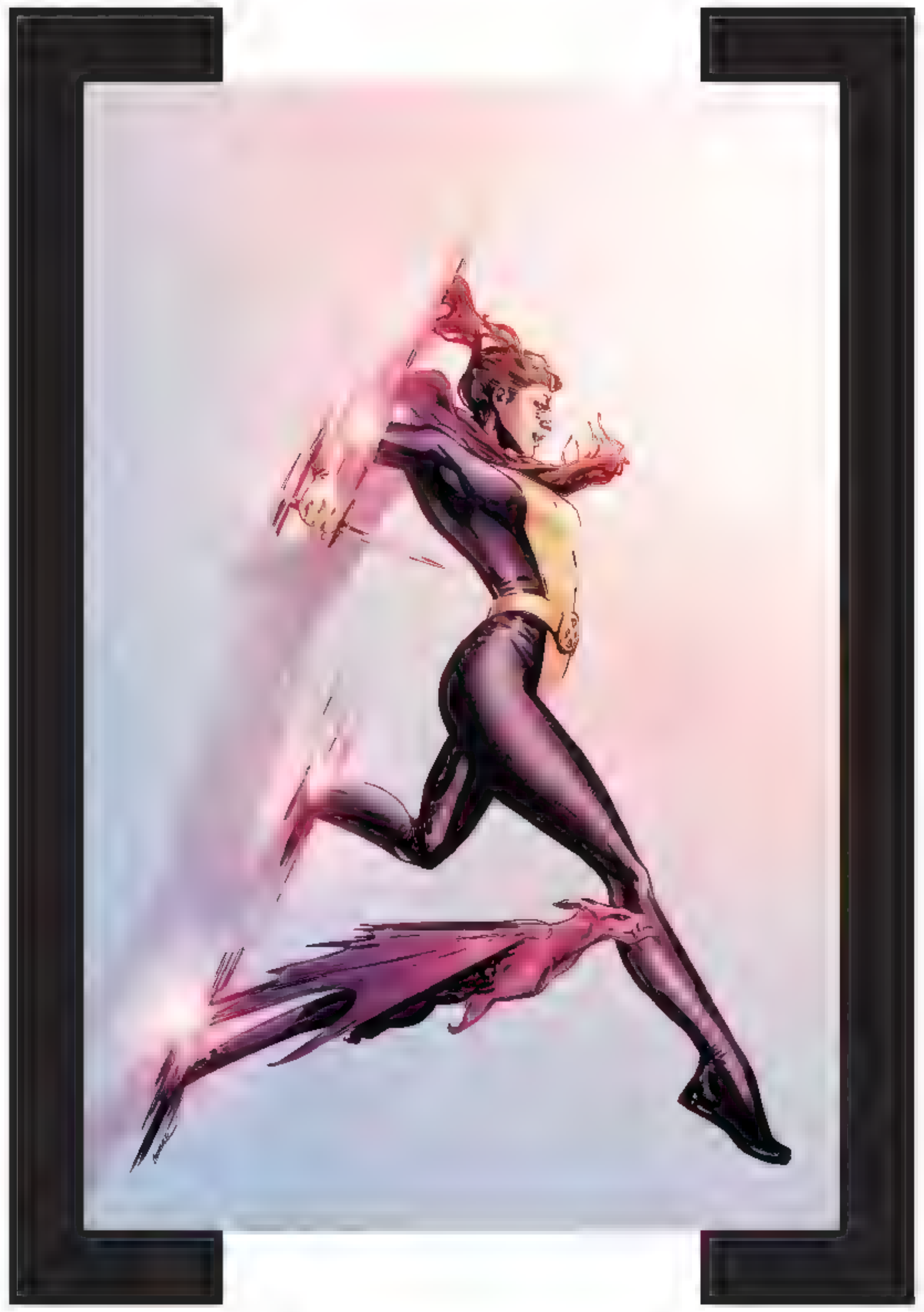
EXCALIBUR #15 VARIANT
by Iban Coello
& Jesus Aburtov


MARAUDERS #13
HELL'S STORM
VILLAINS! STAND YOU BACK!!
FOR I COMMAND THE RAIN ABOVE -- AND THE FIRE BELOW!
DEATHLIFE
a horror story

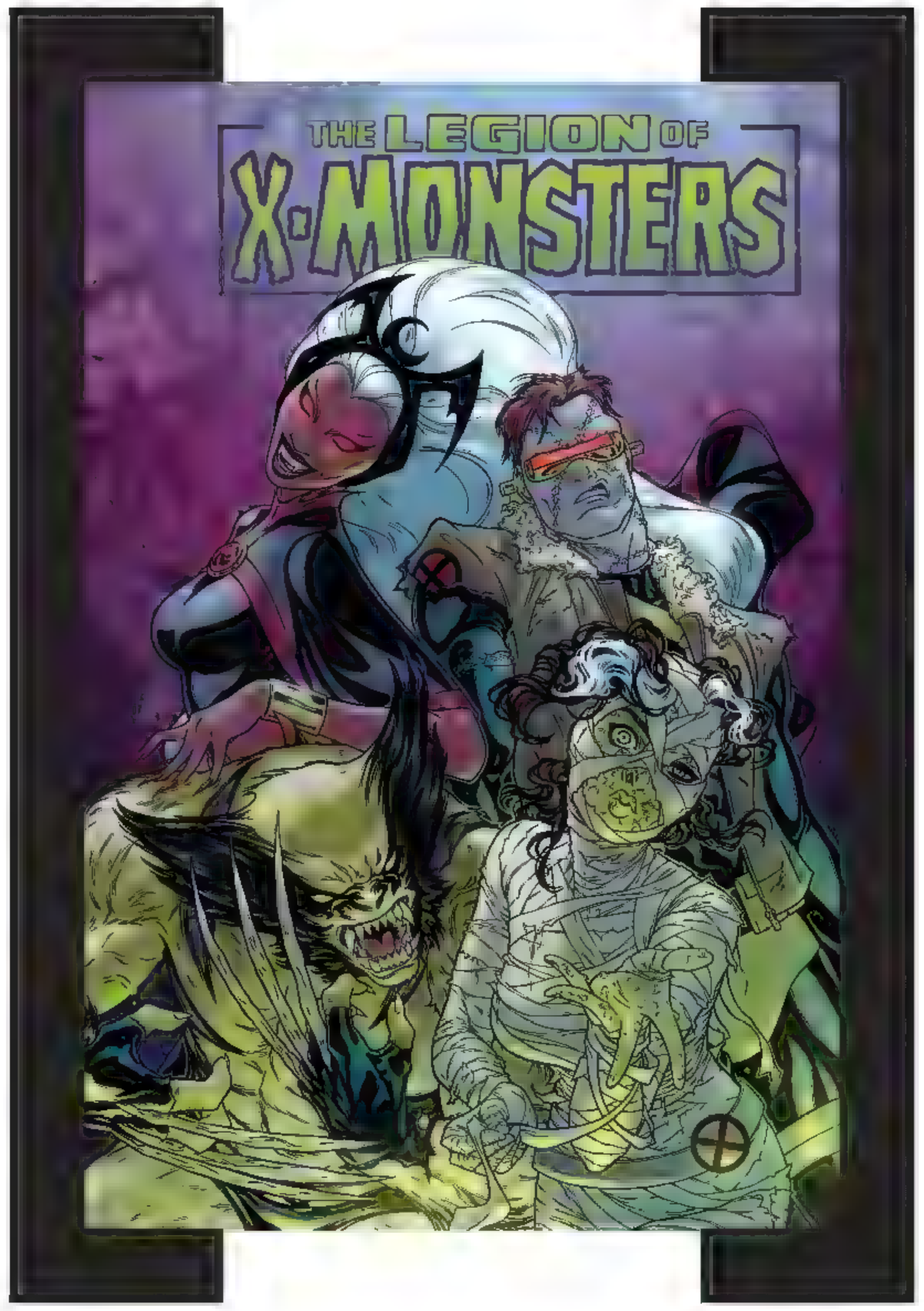
MARAUDERS #13 HELL'S STORM HORROR VARIANT
by Khary Randolph & Emilio Lopez



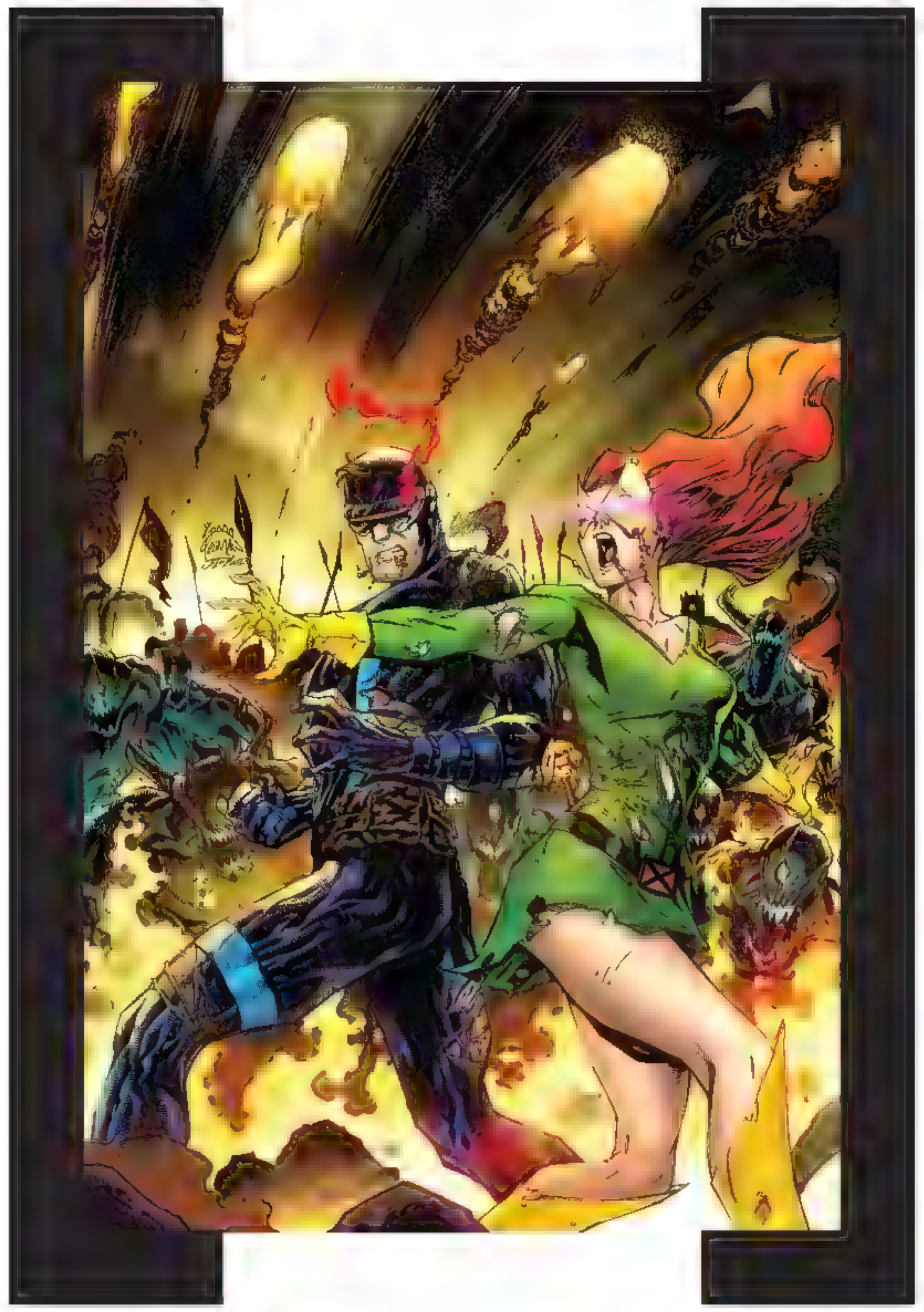
X-MEN #15 VARIANT
by Peach Momoko



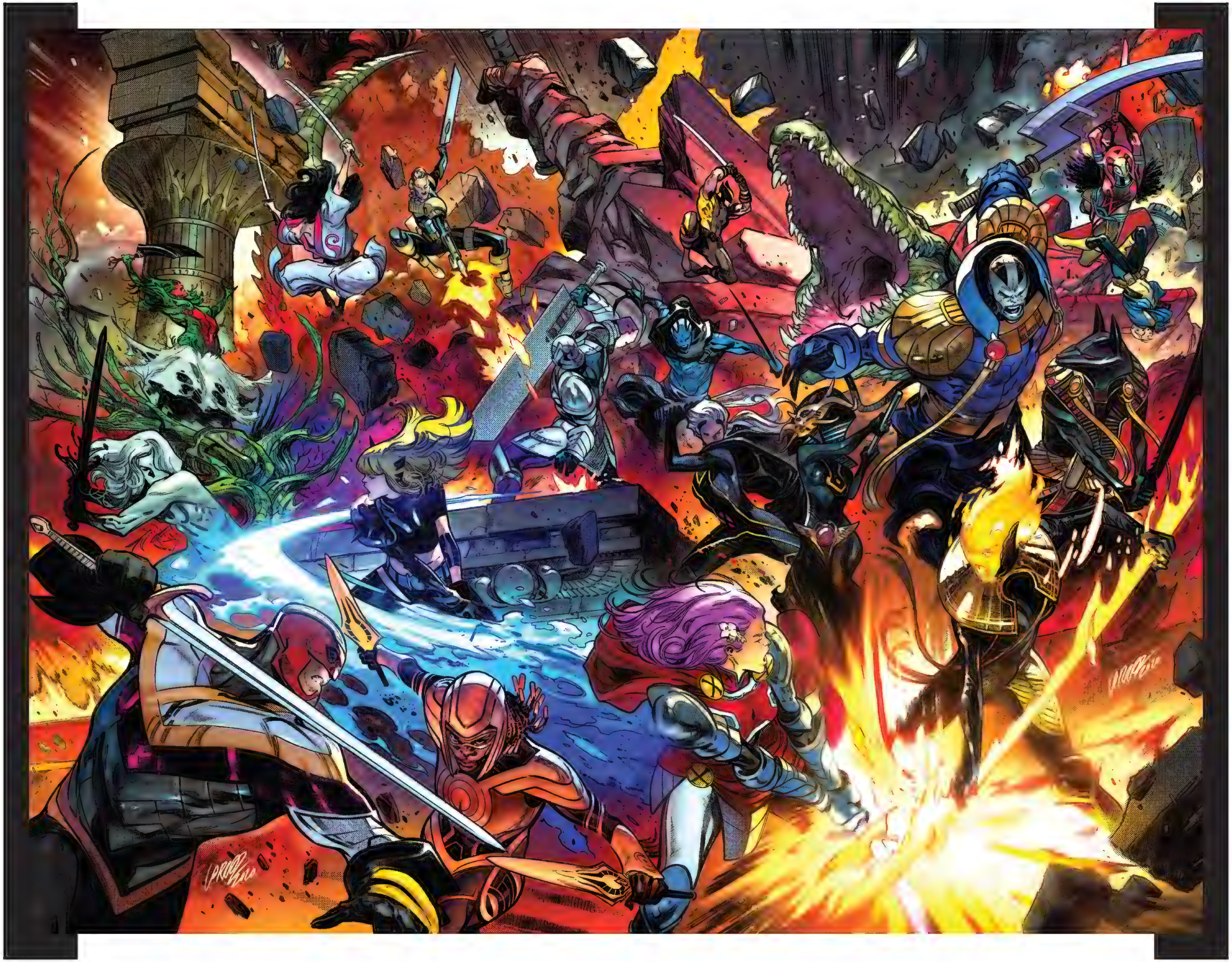
X-MEN #15 STORMBREAKERS VARIANT
by Carmen Carnero


THE LEGION OF
X-MONSTERS

X-MEN #13 LEGION OF X-MONSTERS HORROR VARIANT
by Russell Dauterman



X OF SWORDS: DESTRUCTION #1 VARIANT
by Ryan Stegman, JP Mayer
& David Curiel



EXCALIBUR #15 & X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 CONNECTING VARIANTS
by Pepe Larraz

X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 VARIANT
by Mike del Mundo

X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 VARIANT
by Jesús Saiz

X OF SWORDS: DESTRUCTION #1 VARIANT
by Peach Momoko

ANNIHILATION
GENESIS

X OF SWORDS: DESTRUCTION #1 VARIANT
by Pepe Larraz

X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 VARIANT
by Dan Mora
& Tamra Bonvillain

X OF SWORDS: STASIS #1 VARIANT
by Leinil Francis Yu
& Sunny Gho

[kra_[0.0]
[koa_[0.0]

[ara_[0.0]
[kko_[0.0]

[01-22]
[XOS_X]

“Raise. Your. Sword.”
— Saturnyne

Long ago, they formed a single land. Torn apart by an ancient war, they’ve existed in separate dimensions for thousands of years. Now Arakko has fallen to a dark army, and the same murderous forces are coming for Krakoa.

But between these two halves of a whole stands the nexus of realities known as Otherworld and the whims of its Omniversal Majestrix, Opal Luna Saturnyne.

As she declares a contest of worlds, each side must find its ten blades — and the champions who will wield them on the fields of battle. The X-Men thought they’d found peace and conquered death. They were wrong.

Collecting:

X of Swords: Creation	#1
X of Swords: Stasis	#1
X of Swords: Destruction	#1
X-Men (2019)	#12–15
Excalibur (2019)	#13–15
Marauders(2019)	#13–15
X-Force (2019)	#13–14
New Mutants (2019)	#13
Wolverine (2020)	#6–7
Cable (2020)	#5–6
Hellions (2020)	#5–6
X-Factor (2020)	#4

By:
Jonathan Hickman, Tini Howard, Leah Williams, Benjamin Percy, Vita Ayala, Zeb Wells, Ed Brisson, Gerry Duggan, Pepe Larraz, Mahmud Asrar, Carlos Gómez, Viktor Bogdanovic, Matteo Lolli, Carmen Carnero, Rod Reis, Phil Noto, R.B. Silva, Leinil Francis Yu, Stefano Caselli, Joshua Cassara, Marte Gracia, Sunny Gho, Israel Silva, Matthew Wilson, Edgar Delgado, David Curiel, Nolan Woodard and Guru-eFX.

MARVEL

PARENTAL ADVISORY

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